Maximum Willpower by BimeyMooMimey

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Summary:

William Byers and Maxine Mayfield both have secrets that are eating them apart. As they begin to bond, both of them realize that the person who understands each other the most is each other. This is the story of two best friends who have gone through a lifetime of abuse discovering their sexuality, bonding together, and learning through each other how to accept themselves for who they are.

Unfortunately for them, everything they are dealing with gets harder before it gets easier.

(Unfortunately for us, this series is on hiatus. I DO plan on coming

back to it...eventually. Just be patient in the meantime. Sorry!!!)

1. Thy Will Be Done

Author's Note:

> New fic here! I've always loved when Max and Will have been portrayed as besties, so I decided to start a fanfiction about that! Chapters will switch between being written through Will and Max's perspectives. There is a loose plot I have in mind for this, but past the first few chapters this will largely be a collection of one-shots with Max and Will being badass and supportive of each other and maybe some cute Will/Mike and Max/El moments as well. I hope you enjoy it!

The first time Will Byers realized he might be different was when his friends were talking about girls in their class when they were in elementary school.

Mike was practically swooning over Sarah Williamson, while Dustin and Lucas often found themselves fighting over Jennifer Hayes; a girl who had never shown the slightest bit of interest in either of them, let alone even acknowledged their existence. But *no*, because Dustin once lent her his pencil, he was CERTAIN that he and Jennifer were soulmates. Lucas obviously argued against this point of view.

And Will? Well…he didn't really think about any girls. The idea of a girlfriend sounded nice, but he never really understood the "girl" aspect of it. But he didn't say this out loud, so he just avoided the question when Mike inevitably asked him what girls he had a crush on. His father, who was about to leave him and his family a few years later, had made it very clear in vulgar language that frightened him that boys were supposed to like girls, and nothing else. So even though he didn't like any girls right now, he would probably find a girl later on, he told himself at the time.

It wasn't until middle school, when his hormones began to kick in, did Will realize that not only was he not able to like any girls, but he liked boys. One boy in particular. And to make matters worse, the boy that he liked was his close friend, Mike.

But Will didn't have time to dwell on that for too long after his realization, because he was swooped into Hell and forced to flee from a monster that wanted to eat him. Probably. Nor did he have time to truly understand his feelings in the year after he got back from that place, largely due to the fact that he had to fight back sustained and belligerent attempts from a demon to possess his body and bring about the apocalypse. And then the demon succeeded in possessing him, leading to another ordeal in which his friends had to save the world and his family had to exorcise the demon, or the Mind Flayer, out of him.

Less than a week after the ordeal, Will was practically confined to his bed. At his mother's request, he was taking a sick week from school, and Will wasn't going to complain about that. He felt like shit, anyway. After all, the incident where he was possessed by a gaseous, interdimensional demon from another realm was still very fresh in his mind, and that tended to take a toll on people.

That morning, he thought it was a Thursday, Will was stirred from his light sleep when he heard the front door open, and his mother, Joyce, warmly welcome someone in. Groggily, he checked the time on his bedside clock: it was 4:00, so school should have let out pretty soon. Oh. So, he guessed that it wasn't morning after all.

Will heard a slight knock on the door. His friends had been visiting him every day after school, so this wasn't exactly unexpected. He groggily muttered for them to come in, but it wasn't Mike, Dustin, or Lucas. It was Max.

"Hey, Byers," she said, giving him a small but wry smile. "How're you holding up?"

Will breathed through his nose. "Like shit," he said, smiling back as Max closed the door behind her. Will leaned up against the pillow on his bed as Max took a seat on the chair at his desk, moving it towards him.

"Understandable," she said, chuckling lightly. "Although, if it makes you feel any better, you look significantly less like shit than when I was here last."

Will snorted. “Thanks, Max,” he said.

Will hadn’t remembered much about the night his family forced the Mind Flayer out of him and they had all saved the world, again… everything was just happening so fast around him, that it was hard for his fried brain to keep up with, and he had crashed immediately once his mother, Jonathan, and Nancy had taken him back home. He remembered briefly seeing Max along with everyone else, a fact that surprised him. After his disappearance the year before, the party had agreed that they could tell no one else about the supernatural events of what happened; partly because they knew they were being watched, but also because they enjoyed keeping secrets that only they knew about. But now, in his dreary state, it seemed that Max was a part of the party; a fact that Will knew Mike was probably not the least bit happy about.

Will got a more formal explanation from the party the day after, when Mike, Lucas, Dustin, and Max had shown up while he was still crashed in bed. Apparently, Lucas had told Max everything, and had even helped them fight monsters and save the day. Mike, although still a little unfriendly to her, seemed to begrudgingly accept that she was “in the know” about everything. Whether that meant she was officially part of the party or not yet, seemed to be a matter of discussion for another time. This was only a minor detail in a much longer story of everything that had happened, the details of which he was still trying to wrap his head around.

One detail he definitely did catch up on, however, was that Eleven, the telekinetic girl who had helped save him from the Upside Down, was back. And Mike seemed ecstatic about that.

This was the first time since then that Will had seen Max, and this was the only time that they were actually alone in a room together, without any of the other party members. And Will didn’t dislike Max, not at all; he just didn’t know her. So he wasn’t sure why she was showing up to see him but none of the others weren’t.

“The guys aren’t coming, by the way,” Max said as she brushed a strand of her long, red hair out of her eyes, almost as if she was reading her thoughts. “They’re with Chief Hopper…to see Eleven.”

Will blinked. “Oh.”

Max shrugged. “Yeah, they’re pretty stoked about it. But, uh, I got the picture that I wasn’t really invited, so I decided to hang here because there’s no way in hell I’m going back home this early in the day, and now that I actually know some people here I’d prefer to go to the arcade with friends.” She looked at Will, and then away again. “I know you don’t really know me, so if you want some time alone I totally get it.”

“No!” Will said quickly, sitting up a little further. Max’s head whipped up to look at him. “Seriously, I like the company. I’m glad you’re here,” he said, smiling reassuringly. “Even if you have to deal with me being under house arrest.”

Max gave him another one of those sly, quirky side smiles. “Thanks, Will,” she said, breathing out as she reclined in the chair. “I’m glad I’m here, too. Honestly, even if I could go to see Eleven, I don’t think I would. At least not right now. That one time we met was…weird. I don’t think she likes me.”

“Yeah?” Will asked, raising an eyebrow as he crossed his legs under the covers. “Why do you think that?”

Max sighed. “She was just acting so weird. Like, I had heard all of this really cool stuff about her, like how she can move stuff with her mind and once flipped over a car and how she made people’s eyes bleed and killed the Demo…whatever it’s called,” Max said.

“Demogorgon,” Will jumped in helpfully.

“Yeah, that’s it. And then when I meet her in person, she looks *way* cooler than she sounded when Lucas described her to me. She was dressed in black from head to toe, and had punk eyeshadow and everything. She looked…” Max trailed off, smiling to himself. For some reason, Will felt like he knew that smile. And at the same time, he didn’t. It was both intensely familiar and hopelessly distant all at once. “Anyway, so I go up to her and say hi. I even extend my hand out to shake hers. And she…like, she just glared at me and walked away, as if I was one of the bad guys! I mean, I get she doesn’t know me, but seriously? What did I ever do to her?”

Will shrugged. “Honestly, I have no idea. I’ve never met her before,” Will paused. “Well, that’s not entirely true. For a moment, in the Upside-Down, I felt her talk to me to try to reach out to me…that was right before…” Will paused, suddenly his casual tone receding as he became serious, “…before the Demogorgon got me.”

Max’s amused smiled faded as the two of them sat in silence. Will immediately felt bad for bringing it up. It’s not like he meant to… sometimes, it just slipped out. “Sorry,” he said after a brief pause between them. “What I meant to say is, I don’t think she’s a bad person. Maybe you can come with me when I meet her? After I feel better.”

“Yeah…I think I’d like that,” Max said, looking over at Will. There was something subtly yet profoundly different about the way Max looked at him compared to the way his friends, his family, and practically everyone else looked at him. Everyone else was always looking at him like he was going to fall over and break down at any moment. Even Mike, his closest friend, still looked at him like that. But Max…something about the way she was looking at him then made Will realize that she didn’t think that way. Will didn’t know why or how, but she saw him differently.

“You’re a real tough son of a bitch, you know that?” Max said, a rueful smile returning to her face.

Will blinked in surprise. “Excuse me?”

“You know what I mean. If that Upside-Down place is anything what it was like for me being in those creepy tunnels for fifteen minutes, and you survived there for a week…then you had to deal with this Mind Flayer creature chasing you around for a year, and then possessing you, but even then, you fought back with everything you had…” Max trailed off. “Maybe it’s just because I’m new to this whole interdimensional shit, but I don’t think I would have been able to handle any of that. You’re brave, that’s what I’m saying. You’re strong.”

Will, speechless, blinked again. “U-uh, I don’t really see it like that, but thanks,” he said quietly. The fact of the matter was, he didn’t think he was brave, or strong, or a “tough son of a bitch”. He was just

a coward who happened to show up at the wrong place at the wrong time. He wasn't strong in dealing with the Demogorgon, or the Mind Flayer. All he did was run away until they both caught up to him. And that's not to mention all of the other times in his life that he had run away from things he was scared of. In his mind, he wasn't tough; he was cowardly.

"It's true. I wouldn't just say that to make you feel better. Trust me, I know tough, and you're tough," Max insisted, getting up and sitting on the far end of the bed next to him. "But I get it. Everyone has their moments of weakness, and that's fine." She looked at him, a little more seriously. "Listen…if you ever want to talk with me, about anything, you can trust me. It doesn't even have to be related to all of that. I know you have the other guys, but I also know that they can get pretty protective of you sometimes, so…all I'm saying is if you can't handle that sometimes, you can come to me," she said.

Will looked at her, considering what she was saying. Sure, he didn't really know Max well. But something about how genuine and upfront she was with him made him trust her almost immediately. So, he nodded, smiling slightly. "Thanks, Max," he said.

Shortly thereafter, the two of them moved out into the living room and spent most of the rest of the day playing on Will's Atari, with Max demolishing pretty much every game he had, and just talking. He quickly realized that Max was one of the coolest girls he had ever met, and they had quite a lot in common: their love of video games, nerdy books, Star Wars, and she even liked to draw as well. Although she insisted that she wasn't as good as him at drawing. By the end of the day Will had agreed to teach her the basic rules of Dungeons and Dragons the next time they hung out, a game he had once thought practically acted as a female repellent. In a different universe, Max might have been the perfect person for Will to start a relationship with.

But that was never meant to be. The moment the thought crossed his mind as Max headed out, it was immediately quashed as he realized he didn't like her that way; he wasn't sure he physically could. He didn't like girls. And as the pain of the last year began to fade, this thought became even more omnipresent in his mind.

It was only a year later when he finally admitted this out loud to someone, and that person ended up being Max. The two became very close over the past year as she was “officially” inducted into the party, with Mike formally accepting her after some convincing from Will, Lucas, and Dustin. After the Snowball, she had begun dating Lucas. Shortly afterwards, Mike began dating El, despite her still laying low with Hopper in the woods.

Will liked El. She was quiet like him, kind, and had certainly had a rough upbringing. She deserved happiness. And Will knew that Mike would be able to make her happy; Mike had made Will happy nearly his entire childhood. He would get over his feelings for him, he told himself.

But he was wrong. As time wore on, his feelings for Mike only intensified as El and Mike’s bond was strengthened. Sometimes, when he felt it worst, Will was jealous of El. He hated himself whenever he felt that way. He was never angry at El; he was just sad that it was *her* who was the center of Mike’s attention, rather than him. And he hated himself more whenever he found himself unhappy around them. They were happy together, what the *fuck* was his problem??

Matters for him only became worse when, at the end of summer break, El announced that she was going to high school along with everyone else. Apparently, she was a quick learner, and they had taught her some math and science at the lab to the point where she would be nearly all caught up with everyone else. And although Will was happy for her, that also meant more time with Mike at school. Staring deeply into each other’s eyes in the hallway. Giggling with one another at the back of the class. Sneaking in a few kisses when they thought no one was looking.

He hid his feelings the best he could. And it wasn’t too hard, because he did like both of them. He liked spending time with El, she was a good friend and he liked talking to her. He *definitely* liked spending time with Mike, for reasons he didn’t need to go over. Spending time with both of them together, however…sometimes Will couldn’t handle it. It was becoming too much.

Meanwhile, Dustin himself had gotten a girlfriend (it was none other than Jennifer Hayes, the girl he had swooned over in elementary). Leaving Will all alone. But Will didn't want to date anyone…well, at least anyone other than Mike. And it hurt like hell.

The day he told her was just like any other day. As school let out, all of the party headed to the bike rack as usual. Mike and the guys wanted to go to the arcade, and El decided to tag along. Will, already drained from another day of pretending to smile too hard, decided that he wanted to go home. What he wasn't counting on was that Max would choose him over the arcade.

"See, Byers, once you beat every game in the place, the arcade is kind of boring," she told him with the both casual and cheekily boastful voice that Will had gotten to know well over the past year. "I'll check in every now and then to see if anyone beats my high score on any of the games, but until then I'd rather spend my quarters on something else."

"Oh yeah? Like what?" Will said, grinning at her as he walked away from the school with his bike. Max was carrying her skateboard in one hand as they got onto the road.

"I don't know, dude! Ice cream? Movie tickets?" she said in a fake exasperated tone. "Maybe I'll save up for my fucking future instead of wasting all of my money on video games?" Will laughed as he got onto his bike.

Will had grown very close to the red-haired girl over the past year. That was another thing that had changed. Growing up, he had always seen Mike as his natural best friend, but after he realized he had feelings for him, he knew that he would always have to hide something about himself from him, lest his friendship be ruined. But Max? He felt like he could be himself around her. Even if he was still hesitant to tell her about his attraction toward boys, let alone everything else that came with that.

"Uh, hello? Earth to William? I asked you a question?" she said, waving her hands at the boy to get his attention as she rode on her skateboard. Will turned his face to look at her.

Will gave her a small, regretful smirk. “Sorry, Max. Sometimes you can overwhelm me with how much you talk,” he said playfully. Max rolled her eyes.

“Yeah, very funny asshole. But I was asking you a serious question,” she said, gliding alongside him as Will kept his bike slow. “Have you been okay with the, uh…the nightmares?”

Will’s smile faded as he grimaced. Of course, after you deal with the variety of monsters that appear from the Upside-Down like he had, panic attacks were inevitable. They had started back after he had gotten back from the Upside-Down, although at the time they were also associated with the Mind Flayer trying to get him. After the Mind Flayer was dealt with, however, Will still got attacks, even if he knew the danger had subsided. Compared to his old episodes, they usually happened at night, when it was dark and cold. Sometimes he just woke from his sleep with a start, although other times they were much more violent.

In the past year, Max had stayed at the Byers house frequently; usually not overnight, but sometimes his mom allowed it. Both of them had made it *very* clear to her early on that they didn’t like each other that way. Max’s situation at home was on the unstable side, to say the least, and Will’s mom immediately understood that and let her stay on a pull-out mattress in Will’s room. And so, Max had experienced some of those panic attacks, where Will woke up crying his eyes out and screaming in the middle of the night. She would immediately wake up and rush over to him, hugging him tightly and letting him cry in her arms.

If it was anyone else, like his mom whenever she woke him up from his nightmares, they would smother him. But Max didn’t. She respected his privacy, and just provided a shoulder to cry on in the middle of the night. Even though he knew she cared, she never forced him to talk about any of the nightmares unless he wanted to talk about it. And after a particularly bad episode last week when she stayed over that coincidentally fell right around the two-year anniversary of his disappearance, she was worried about him.

Will shrugged on his bike. “I’ve been okay,” he said, glancing at Max who still had a worried expression on her face. “Max, seriously, I

haven't had anymore. The last one I had was with you, I promise."

It was true, he hadn't had anymore. In fact, his nightmare-induced panic attacks had gotten consistently rarer over the past year. Plus, he didn't like lying to Max, so he would have reluctantly told her anyway if he did have more and she asked. He was comfortable talking about it with her more than anyone else in his life right now.

"Okay, I believe you," she said finally, swerving along the sideroad next to him. "You're horrible at lying anyway, so I would be able to tell."

"I'm not lying!"

"I know! That's why I believe you, because I'd be able to know if you're lying!" Max said, laughing as the two exchanged bits of banter back and forth. Will liked spending time with Max. He didn't have to worry about pretending to be okay or forcing a smile on his face everywhere he went; with Max, the smile just came naturally. But lurking at the back of his mind, he knew he still wasn't being entirely honest with her.

As the two approached the Byers' household, which was there main place to hang out when it was just the two of them, Max rushed him inside as she was reminded of something she had heard the other day. Something that, when Will heard it, made his stomach twist into an uncomfortable knot.

"So, Byers," Max started, grinning at Will playfully before continuing. "You might be interested to know that I've heard a little rumor… about you and Ashley Donavan."

Will's smile faded. Max had tried to do this a couple of times: mentioning girls that she thought Will might be dating. Or girls she thought he could be dating. But what she didn't know was that he couldn't do that. These were always his least favorite conversations to have with Max. The ones that reminded him that she did not understand everything about him.

"No, Max, just because Ashley is my partner in Biology doesn't mean that she's my girlfriend," Will said, sighing. He hoped that that would

be enough to drop the subject. But Max seemed persistent.

“Okay…but she’s into you, right?” Max asked with a quirky smile. “Come on, you two would totally be cute together, don’t deny it.”

Will sighed again, plopping down on the bed in his room. “Max, I don’t like her that way,” he said simply.

“Fine. Okay, I get it, Ashley’s just a friend…” Max said, sitting down next to Will as her excitement faded for a blip, but then returned with full force. “Well, William, I’ll have you know that I’ve been compiling a list of fine, charming, young bachelorettes, as potential girlfriends for you!” she said, grinning at him as Will sank into his seat. “How about Hannah Bradford? You know, the girl in your math class. Sure, she’s a sophomore, but she’s really nerdy and I really think you guys would have a lot in com—”

“Max, no. I don’t like Hannah like that.”

Max paused, looking over at him and nodding. “Ooookay…what about Margaret Hughes? I’ve seen her in the arcade a few times, and I mean obviously when you see a girl actually in an arcade you know she’s serious business. I don’t think you have any classes with her, but I could introduce you to—”

“No.”

“Summer Jennings!” Max exclaimed. “She’s in your art class! Look, you two would be perfect for each other. She’s talented, smart, and on the cheerleading squad, so maybe after her practice you can stay after and leave her some flowers from—”

“Max, please, stop!” Will shouted, his voice cracking. Max jumped back, looking visibly hurt. He immediately felt guilty: why was he taking this out on her? It’s not like she knew. She probably had no idea. Will sighed for the third time in a minute. “I’m sorry…Max, I don’t want a girlfriend,” he said quietly. “I know you’re trying to help, but I…I can’t.”

“Why not? Will…” Max trailed off, seemingly at a loss for words. It was easy to tell that she was disappointed. “I’m sorry if I upset you…I

just, you're the only one of us without anyone. I was just trying to help…I wanted to make you happy, y'know?"

"No, Max, it's not your fault," Will said, keeping his eyes on the ground. "I'm just…people like me aren't meant to have girlfriends. I don't think…I don't think I'm meant to be happy."

Will immediately regretted what he said as the words tumbled out of his mouth. He had revealed too much. He gulped. Now Max seemed to be back to her concerned, worried self. She didn't show this side of her often, but when she did, it was nearly impossible for him to lie to her. Will squeezed his eyes shut, trying to fight back tears.

"Will, don't say that," Max said, placing a hand on his shoulder. "What do you mean?"

Will couldn't look at her. "I…I can't tell you," he said quietly.

"What? Do you have a crush on me? Will, I don't care, I know Dustin's liked me for over a year. I didn't think you did, but if that's all this is then you're seriously—"

"No! It's not," Will gulped, shuddering as his voice cracked again. "It's not that."

"Then what is it?" Max asked. Will's eyes were still on the ground, away from her, but he could feel her worried gaze fixated on him now.

His life hadn't been easy since everything happened; in fact, it had been very painful. But in the year since the Mind Flayer, Max was the best thing to happen to his life. Will had a friend, no, a best friend who accepted him because he was *him*. He also knew how people around here thought of people like him, and if Max walked, he wasn't sure that he would be able to handle it. But he knew he had to tell her. Taking a deep, shaky breath, Will uttered those two fateful words that would change their friendship forever:

"I'm gay."

Silence. Complete and utter silence.

Then, Will felt Max punch him in the arm.

“Ow!” Will said as he recoiled, blinking and rubbing his arm. He looked at Max, baffled. “What was that for?”

“*That*,” Max said, pointing at his arm, “is for thinking that you couldn’t tell me anything, ever.” She punched his arm again, lighter this time but just enough to make him jump again. “*That* is for not shutting me up earlier when I kept on bringing up girls for you to date. And *this*,” Max lunged at Will, wrapping her arms tightly around the startled, confused boy. “This is to tell you right here, right now that *nothing* will change between us. You’re still Will Byers, you’re still my best friend, and I still love you.”

It took Will a minute to fully register the words Max was saying; another minute to realize that she was hugging me, not trying to choke him. Once it all hit him, however, it washed over him like a tidal wave. He collapsed in her arms, crying his eyes out for what felt like an eternity. It was the first time he had told another person, let alone said the words aloud to even himself. Even though he guessed that Max didn’t really understand what it was he was feeling, she still accepted him. Probably more than he accepted himself.

What Will didn’t realize at the time, but would realize soon, was that Max actually *did* understand exactly how he felt. Because Maxine Mayfield had a little secret of her own.

2. Screwed Together

Notes for the Chapter:

> Warning before you start: the very beginning of this chapter is potentially triggering, due to the generally disgusting attitudes of both Billy and Neil. It's very short but it's present and unfortunately necessary.
>
> Without further ado, here's chapter two! :)

The first time Maxine Mayfield realized she might be different was when she was eight years old. Her Mom had divorced her Dad and had begun dating Neil Hargrove, a strict, cruel man that Max never liked. She didn't like his older son, Billy, either, and the idea that Neil wanted her to treat him as her new father and Billy as her older brother always made her want to vomit. Her Mom and Neil were engaged after a mere four months of dating each other, and six years before they (or rather, *he*) decided to pack up everything and leave the familiarity of San Francisco for Hawkins, Indiana.

One day after school, Neil was driving both her and Billy back from school. Max was in the backseat, staring glumly out the window as usual, desperately wishing that she was anywhere else then. Then, something caught her eye at a stoplight: two young women, probably in their early twenties, walking along the street, holding hands. The two stopped for a moment, smiling at each other, while the shorter girl pecked the taller one on her cheek. The taller girl wrapped an arm around the shorter girl.

Max didn't know why, but something about the couple enamored her. Something about it was…beautiful. Pure. She wanted to be the girl wrapping her arms around the other girl, and she wanted to peck the other girl on the cheek back. She wouldn't mind pecking both of them on the cheek.

Billy had obviously been following Max's gaze, as he rolled down the window and let out a loud, obnoxious whistle. Neil glanced at them for a few seconds, then scoffed. "I hope you didn't see that, Maxine," he said distastefully, not looking back at her.

Max glared up at the front seat, then tried to look back at the girls. They were both walking away, rather quickly, and she only saw their backs as they disappeared along the corner. She instantly felt the guilt that she knew her stepbrother would never feel for scaring them off.

“See what?” she asked, playing the fool.

“Those dykes,” Neil replied, practically spitting out the word. “I don’t want them influencing you with their ungodly ways.” Something about the way he had said that made Max feel sick to her stomach.

“Oh, come on, they were kinda hot,” Billy said, chortling as he closed the window. That made Max even more uncomfortable and angry as she kicked against his seat. “Hey!” he snarled, turning around to glare at her.

“Billy, I don’t care what kind of pornography magazines you masturbate to, just as long as Maxine doesn’t become one of *them*,” Neil said, ignoring them. Max still didn’t understand what was so wrong with those women.

Max wanted to let it go, but she couldn’t help but be intrigued by the girls. “Why is it so wrong for a girl to kiss another girl like that?” she asked timidly, still not fully understanding.

Neil was silent for a moment as he turned around. The stoplight was now green, but he didn’t seem to care. Stopping all of the traffic behind him, he looked Max dead-in-the-eye, his gaze cold enough for Hell to freeze over by him simply looking at it.

“Because girls who do that are freaks of nature,” he told her, his voice gravely and lowering a couple octaves. “Do you understand?”

Gulping, Max nodded. And Neil turned his head back away from her, ignoring her existence entirely.

In the years that followed, whenever Max felt that way about girls, she repressed it. More than that, she tried to ignore it all together. See a cute girl? Nope. No, she didn’t. She could recognize that a girl was objectively attractive without being attracted to her herself,

right? Right. That was all it was. She was definitely not attracted to girls. She liked boys, not girls. She thought that boy in her grade… what was his name, Jeffery? She couldn't remember…she thought he was cute…maybe? No, yes. He was cute, because she was supposed to, no, she *liked* boys. Not girls. End of story. That what she kept on telling herself, over and over again, until she began to convince herself that it was only a one-time feeling she had had.

And it worked, for a time, until she met the girl who was named after a number, or as she called her, Jane.

An incredulous Max first heard stories about this girl through Lucas, and at first, she thought that it was all just some elaborate joke to keep her around. She understood, after all. People had their secrets, and if they didn't want to tell her theirs then that was their decision.

But then everything happened. And she believed Lucas. It was hard to describe everything that happened that wild, crazy night, but if she had to pick one thing that defined everything…it would be Jane. Although she still only knew her as Eleven.

There she was, fearing for her life as she huddled around a group of young teenagers and adults, when all of the sudden, a Demodog flew through the window, dead. Then *she* walked in. She was dressed in a punk outfit in nearly all black, black makeup under her eyes, and she had just used the mindpowers Lucas had told her about to kill a monster. More than likely, multiple monsters. Max was speechless. This girl was…

…well, she was beautiful.

Fuck. She was beautiful.

After Mike had hugged her and the others came up to her, Max finally built up the courage to walk up to this person, trying to look as natural and casual as possible. She introduced herself, smiled, and held out her hand, expecting Eleven to shake it.

But she didn't. Instead, she looked at Max as if she had infected everyone with the plague and walked away. Max was speechless once again, although this time more out of confusion than anything. This

telekinetic girl, who would within the next few hours singlehandedly close an interdimensional portal and save the entire world, hated her. And she had no idea why.

Needless to say, she felt alone and confused for the next few days. After everything that happened with Billy, her home was toxic for some time, so she stayed out as much as she could. Mike appeared to at the very least tolerate her, but still didn't really like her. And Dustin and Lucas were acting…strange. Especially Lucas. That's not to mention that all three boys, especially Mike, were obsessed with the return of this legendary Eleven. So, when Chief Hopper finally allowed them to come visit her at some cabin deep in the woods, Max declined and decided to try to see someone else entirely: Will.

Max liked to think that she was a fairly good judge of character. She knew bad people and good people growing up. People like Neil and Billy were bad people. People like Lucas, Dustin, and hell, even Mike, were good people. Out of the four boys, though, at the time she knew Will the least, largely due to him being possessed; but she had a pretty good feeling that he was a good person, too. And when she came over to his house to finally talk with him, she knew she wasn't wrong.

One week later, after Will began to feel better and was back at school, he once again offered Max the chance to meet Eleven again when he was going to. Apparently, she was very keen on seeing him. Wanting to get to the bottom of this girl, Max gratefully took him up on the offer, and before she knew it Hopper was picking both her and Will up in the station wagon. The surly police officer cast her a sideways glance, but didn't say anything as she got in with Will, who smiled at her excitedly.

Hopper dropped them off a bit away from the house, walking them out over to the tripwire and instructing them on the secret knock to get in. Max couldn't help but think that he was a little paranoid at first, but given everything that had happened, she guessed she couldn't blame him for being paranoid. Hopper drove away, having to go back to work, and Will and Max went up to the door, where Will gave the knock. In an instant, Max heard the turning of locks from the inside.

Pausing for a moment, glancing over nervously at Max, Will opened the door. Eleven was sitting on the couch, looking towards the door. Wait, why was she sitting down? Didn't she just unlock the –

Oh, yeah. Mind powers and everything.

Eleven looked over at Will as he opened the door, wiping away the blood trickling down her nose with her sleeve. She was wearing blue overalls and a yellow shirt, and her once-slicked back hair was now a beautifully curly mess; definitely quite the contrast from the one time she had actually met her.

"Eleven," Will said, slowly walking in. There was a faint smile on his lips. "Um, hi, I'm–"

"Will," Eleven interrupted him, a smile widening on her face. "I know. It's…nice to meet you, Will," she said in a slightly halting speech pattern. After looking over at Will as he came in, her eyes turned over to Max. Max, who was still standing stupidly in the doorway, staring directly back at her. And Eleven's happy expression faded.

Will seemed to notice and stepped aside a little bit. "Um, this is Max," he said, motioning over to the red-headed girl awkwardly. "She's a friend of mine…I mean, ours. She, uh, she said you guys met briefly a while ago, but…she wanted to see you."

Max sucked in her breath. She gave Eleven a shy little wave, although to describe it more accurately she lifted up her hand briefly, showed the girl her palm, and then put it back down to her side. Eleven continued to stare at her.

"H-hi…" Max said nervously, giving the girl a weary smile. This did nothing to lessen the intensity of her stare. In fact, as she frowned at the redhead, she only seemed to be even angrier. Yep, if it wasn't clear before, it was definitely clear now: Eleven didn't like her.

"Okay, I get it, I'll just go," Max said, sighing as she stepped a couple paces back. She was not only deeply embarrassed, but also deeply disappointed that this girl still hadn't even said a single word to her. And to be honest, she was feeling a little angry, too. Why had she

come? What was she expecting? “It’s okay if you don’t like me, Mike already doesn’t like me so you have company,” she said in a bitter tone as she slowly turned away. “Nice seeing you, Will.”

“Wait.”

It was the first time Max had ever heard Eleven speak. Slowly, she turned back towards the doorway. Eleven was still looking at her, but her expression had softened a little bit. Will was looking in between the two girls anxiously.

“Why did you say…Mike doesn’t like you?” she asked slowly, looking at Max.

Max furrowed her brow, remaining silent for a moment as she processed the words. “I, uh, well, he doesn’t,” she sputtered, taken off guard that this girl had even acknowledged her presence. “Ever since I tried to become friends with these guys he’s consistently told me to go to hell. He just acts all angry whenever I’m around and gets angry at everyone else when they don’t treat me like I’m literally trying to tear them all apart. So, yeah, I think it’s pretty fair to say that he doesn’t like me.” She could see that Will had concern etched on his face. She supposed that maybe he didn’t know how much Mike had hurt her feelings. Until she let it all out, Max wasn’t sure she had either. Eleven continued to study her, her brow furrowed in confusion.

“But…I saw you,” Eleven said slowly. “Before. At school.”

“What?” Now Max was even more confused. She thought she would remember seeing someone as beautiful as Eleven befo…wait, did she really just tell herself that this girl was beautiful…again???

“You were in the gym-nas-i-um,” Eleven explained, slowly pronouncing each syllable of the longer word. “With Mike. You were…” she paused, not knowing the word for what she was trying to say. She mimed what appeared to be a flat surface with her hands, and Max immediately realized she was talking about her skateboard. “You were…in circles around him. Mike was laughing. I was standing…outside. I thought…” Eleven trailed off, with traces of an embarrassed blush crossing over her face.

Max tried *not* to focus on Eleven's blushing face (which did *not* maker her cuter in any way, nope, definitely not), and instead focused on the words she was saying. Gymnasium. Skateboard…and that's when it hit her. She happened to see her in school, somehow, the one moment that Max was actually able to get a laugh out of Mike. Literally every other interaction that occurred between them involved Mike scoffing or yelling at her, but that was the one time, the one time, that Mike laughed with her. And right after he laughed, Max fell over on her skateboard, something that she never did. And Eleven…she was jealous.

…wait, did Eleven use her mindpowers to make her fall down on her skateboard?

"Eleven, trust me, I'm not trying to steal Mike from you," Max said, her tone coming off as annoyed. "And I sincerely doubt that Mike thinks of me that way. Like I said, he doesn't like me, like, at all. Not even as a friend."

"Oh…" Eleven blushed even harder, and she seemed to be… ashamed? Max sighed, and was just about to turn away and leave for real. But as she began to walk away, she felt herself freeze in place. And it definitely wasn't because she decided to stop moving. "I'm sorry…" Max heard Eleven say behind her guiltily. "Stay? Please?"

Max felt Eleven's mental grip over her body relax and Max smiled to herself. As far as she was concerned, that could happen to her as many times as Eleven wanted, and she still wouldn't be able to get over how cool that was. She turned her head back and walked back inside. Will was sitting down at the couch, looking at the two of them closely, while Eleven was standing a few feet away from the door a trickle of blood coming down her nose.

"You can do that pretty much anytime you want, can't you?" Max asked, and Eleven gave her a small smile and a nonverbal shrug. "Okay, well, let's try this again. I'm Max. It's nice to meet you," she said, extending her hand out with a smile on her face. The smile widened as the curly-haired girl took her hand, and Will breathed out a sigh of relief.

"Jane," she replied, shaking her hand and giving Max a shy smile.

“You can call me Jane. It’s nice to meet you…too.”

Max was never quite sure why Jane insisted on having her call her by her real name, while the other boys, Hopper, and everyone who knew her closely still called her El. At first, she thought that maybe the curly-haired girl was still keeping her at an arm’s length, but that quickly proved not to be the case. If anything, Max felt closer to Jane for being able to call her that. Of course, once it was safe for Jane to be outside of her cabin, she introduced herself as Jane to everyone. But Max was the only one who called her Jane and knew who she really was. It was something that only they had, and no one else did together.

One thing Max *was* sure of was that she liked Jane…a lot…but there was nothing romantic about it!! It was all platonically, of course. The two girls had become very close, particularly after Jane began attending school. Max liked everything about her: her hair, which was still a curly mess; her small, shy smile that she would give someone when she felt that she was out of her element; the way her eyes lit up when she finally understood something people were talking about, almost as if they were lighting a fire provide energy for the entire world…

But no, Max liked Jane strictly platonically. Yes. She had absolutely, definitely *not* fallen madly in love with her. And she was definitely *not* extremely jealous of Mike whenever she saw the two of them together, which was often. Nope. Jane was her friend, just like all of her other friends.

Speaking of her other friends, Max had gotten on significantly better terms with Mike as the year wore on. Apparently, Jane had been able to convince him that she wasn’t so bad (another reason why she was so *amazing*. Wait, why was she thinking that…). Mike and Max were not necessarily close; in fact, out of everyone in the party, they probably knew each other the least. But they were friends. Dustin was still his goofy, wacky self, as always. Will quickly became one of her best friends, and they hung out practically all of the time. She trusted him with everything…well, almost everything. Although to be

fair, she didn't even trust *herself* with those small, intrusive thoughts that kept on popping up whenever she was with Jane…and now, Lucas. Although while her heart seemed to flutter whenever she thought of Jane, all she felt was guilt when she thought of Lucas.

Max liked Lucas. He was funny, witty, and smart as hell (although that's not saying much, because all of them were smart…outside of her, in her opinion). He always knew how to make her laugh and she was one of the first people who befriended her when she came to Hawkins. He was a good friend…and Max kept telling herself that it was something more.

It was pretty obvious that, a month after everything had happened, Lucas liked her. So, at the Snowball, Max asked him to dance. And they kissed. It was short and brief, and when Lucas pulled away he was smiling widely at her. And Max felt…well, she felt weird. Not the type of weird she had heard about, where you get butterflies in your stomach and you feel like you could walk on air. Just…weird. But she forced a smile and continued dancing. She didn't want to ruin the moment, for his sake.

(Later that night, when Max saw Jane dancing with Mike, she felt a different kind of weird)

A few weeks after the Snowball, Lucas asked her out. She said yes. A couple weeks after that, Lucas announced to everyone who would listen that they were boyfriend and girlfriend. It was Max's first ever "official" relationship. And she felt…

Nothing. But she told herself that wasn't true. She told herself that she liked Lucas, or that she just needed to get used to being in a relationship. So she kissed him more, just to see if she would like it more after she was used to it. She didn't. She never told him, though. And in the moments she did enjoy it, she couldn't get the image of that particular curly-haired girl out of her mind, and how much she would prefer kissing her on her small, soft lips…

But she did not like Jane like that. She liked Lucas. She was going to like Lucas. That's what she kept on telling herself, over and over and over again. But try as she might, it never came true, and she never fully believed it.

And suddenly, the lie broke when Will came out to her in late November of her freshman year of high school. All of the prejudices that had built up within her in regards to homosexuality came shattering down to the ground. She knew that she could never hate Will, especially for something like this. And after she was done smothering Will with as much acceptance as she could possibly muster, accepting that he was gay and only loving him more for that, something snapped within her as well.

She was gay, too.

She liked girls.

And her relationship with Lucas was a lie.

"Max!" Max jumped at the sound of her own name as a pair of arms wrapped around her stomach. It was the end of the school day and she was just getting her books from her locker. It was the day after Will told her about himself…and the day after she realized that something was very, very wrong with her relationship with Lucas. All of this time, it was a lie. She tricked him. She misled him. And all day, awash with guilt and self-loathing, she cowardly tried to avoid him…and, well, pretty much everyone at school that day. But Lucas had finally found her.

"Dude, are you okay?" Lucas asked her, his arms still wrapped around her. It was only then that Max noticed her body had stiffened considerably. His voice was etched with concern. She couldn't keep running away from this. She had to do what needed to be done.

"…can we talk?" Max said quietly, not turning around. "Alone." Now she felt Lucas's arms freeze around her, and then quickly move away from her. It was obvious from her tone of voice that he knew what she meant.

Slowly, the two made their way outside. Max didn't dare look at Lucas for a long while, because if she did, she was scared that she would cry. Lucas didn't deserve this. He was a good guy. Why did she have to fuck up everything?

Finally, after what felt like a month's long death march, the two of

them made their way to the back of the school. Max looked down from her feet and at Lucas for the first time, his hurt expression coming at her like a punch in the gut.

He sighed, rubbing his temple with his hand. “Just say it,” he said.

“I-I’m sorry,” Max said shakily, as she tried desperately to hide her eyes behind her long hair. “Lucas, I…I don’t think we can…we can’t be a thing anymore.”

“Max, come on…” Lucas said, a little desperately. Although there was no turning back now. “We were happy together, right? Whatever I did wrong, we can work it out, please, Max.”

“You didn’t do anything wrong!” Max said, her voice cracking for a moment. He didn’t do anything wrong. In another universe…he would have been the perfect boyfriend. She was sure of it. “It’s…I’m what’s wrong,” she said, exhaling as she tried to blink her tears back to look at Lucas again.

“Okay…” Lucas said uncertainly, still looking confused. “Max, whatever it is, we can work through it together, I promise.”

“No, we can’t!” Max shot back, immediately hating the harshness of her tone. Lucas looked taken aback. Classic Maxine, whenever you fuck up, lash out at the people who care about you. Ugh, can’t you do anything right??

After a long pause between them, Lucas looked at her as if he was looking at a stranger. “Max…the last year…did it mean anything to you?” he asked in a hurt tone.

She shuddered. She couldn’t answer that. She couldn’t lie to him yet again, but she knew the truth would hurt him so much. “I still like you, as a friend, Lucas, but…”

“Oh, okay, sure, just pull out every cliché in the book, why don’t you?” Lucas snapped, his anger suddenly flaring up. Max’s eyes widened and she stepped back a little. “Great, pull the ‘it’s not you, it’s me’ card, and also the ‘let’s just be friends’ card too, even though we both know it’s all bullshit!”

“It’s *not* bullshit!” Max said, her voice breaking as tears prickled her eyes once again. That’s right, be mad, Lucas, she thought to herself. She deserved his wrath, every ounce of it.

But as quickly as the anger came to him, it faded. Lucas looked at her apologetically. He sighed. “Okay, Max…okay,” he said reluctantly. The acceptance had set in, but the hurt remained as clear as day. “Just…give me some space. I…I need space,” he said, and then he turned away from her and walked quickly in the opposite direction. Max stayed behind, leaning against the brick wall of the back of the school, watching her now ex-boyfriend leave until she couldn’t handle it any longer. She crumpled to the ground, covering her eyes with her hands as she sobbed.

She lost Lucas. And it’s not like she could talk to Jane about why she left him. She had no one. And yet, she needed someone, *anyone* to talk to about this. And only one person came to mind.

Max arrived at the Byers’ home a few hours after school let out, in the evening. She didn’t have the energy to leave, let alone move, for quite some time. By the time that she skateboarded over and knocked on the door, Joyce was already home. Her expression softened upon seeing the redhead, and Max could tell that she knew she had been crying. Even though she hadn’t gotten a good look at herself, she knew that her eyes were probably all red and puffy.

Letting Max in, Joyce quickly bent down and embraced her in a tight hug. “Oh, honey…” she said as Max sniffled in her arms. She thought that all of the tears had left her by this point, but she was threatening to prove herself wrong. “You want to spend the night?”

Max shakily nodded. This wasn’t an unusual occurrence. When she didn’t feel safe at home, which was more often than she’d like to admit, and she was okay with sucking up her pride, she would come to the Byers. They understood her family situation more than anyone. Although this time, the reason she wanted to stay was different.

“Okay…well, when whenever you want to talk, and I mean *whenever*,

you know that I'm here, okay?" Joyce said protectively as she pulled away. Max smiled, despite herself. In the year that she knew her, Joyce had been a much better mother to her than her actual mom had ever been.

"Thanks, Joyce," she said quietly. She began pulling away, but Joyce pulled her closer and hugger her tightly once again. Max wasn't complaining.

"Dinner's in an hour, okay? Will's in his room," Joyce told her as she let Max go. Max nodded thankfully at her and made her way to Will's room.

Will was lying down on his bed and sat up almost immediately when Max opened the door. Much like his mother, Will also had a fiercely protective streak in him, even though Max tried her best to not need any protection from anyone. She never wanted to be a burden to anyone. Although, she could already tell that Will was worried about her already. He knew that she had been crying almost immediately.

"Hey, Will," Max said as she sat down next to him on the bed, similarly to how they sat just yesterday when Will told her he was gay.

"Hi," Will said, the worried look on his face not disappearing. "Max… what happened?" he asked carefully. He likely knew, just as she knew, that she didn't like talking about her emotions much if at all. But she had to confront this. She needed to tell him.

"I made a mistake, Will…" Max said slowly, letting out a held breath. "I-I, uh, I broke up with Lucas."

Will's eyes widened in shock. To the outside, her and Lucas's relationship looked picture-perfect. Hell, to Lucas, their relationship was probably picture-perfect, until it all ended. She was a good actor when she needed to be, a strength that Max both fully owned but also hated. "…and you think doing that was a mistake?" Will asked slowly.

Max shook her head, looking away from Will. "No…I think dating him in the first place was a mistake. I kept on telling myself that I'd

start to feel something, but…" Max paused, blinking her tears away. Keep it together, Mayfield, she told herself. "I hurt him and lied to him. I-I liked him as a friend, but I, I never felt anything m-more than that…I-I don't think I can…"

"Max, breathe," Will grabbed her hand and squeezed it, and suddenly Max realized that she was breathing very quickly. "Just listen to me, deep breaths." He breathed in and out slowly, and Max tried to follow him until she was back to breathing at a normal pace. She sighed.

"You're good at that," Max said quietly, looking at Will out of the corner of her eye.

Will shrugged. "You've helped me enough times when I'm…um, like that. I know the warning signs," he said. Max let out a shaky laugh, but grew somber once again very quickly. She looked at him. He would be the only one to understand. She needed to tell him. She wanted to tell him. So, she did.

"I'm g—" she started to say, but nearly choked on the word. She couldn't do it. No, she had to. She took a deep breath. "I'm gay, too," she said quietly.

Will's eyes widened. "W-what?" he asked, his jaw dropping in what seemed like shock.

Max let out a shaky breath as she tried to hold back her tears. "Look, I know it's weird because I was dating Lucas…I thought that, uh, maybe be dating him, it would make me not think about it…but then I got a crush on a girl, and after you came out I just…"

She trailed off as soon as Will hugged her again, wrapping his fragile arms around her even tighter than before with a surprising amount of strength. His body shuddered against her as it took Max a moment to hug him back, tightly. Even though she knew he must be going through something similar, it felt so, *so* good to know that he still accepted her. She was never really one for hugs, but she needed this one, badly.

"Okay, okay, I get it, you love me," Max said, a small little smirk on

her face. “Your mother already strangled me when I came in, do you want to choke the air out of me, too?” Will sniffled as he gently punched Max on the arm. That was the difference between them: Max punched first and hugged later, while Will hugged first and punched afterwards. Neither of them pulled away, though.

“You don’t know…” Will said in a tearful voice, and Max could tell that he was crying again. “Y-you don’t know how fucking *good* it feels to not feel alone.”

And that’s when the gravity of this precious moment hit her like a train she had seen coming from the distance for a while, but had now suddenly and unexpectedly slammed into her coming in at 150 miles per hour.

She wasn’t alone. She had someone who was like her, who accepted her, who loved her for who she was. She had Will. Someone now knew that she liked girls, and didn’t see her as a freak of nature like Neil would. In that moment, when everything came to a head, the pent-up emotions, the years of denial and trying to fit in, it all came crashing to the ground. She broke down, crying in relief as she held onto Will tighter.

“I know…trust me, I know,” she said, crying. That’s all either of them did, for a while: just giving each other a much-needed hug and crying their eyes out.

Will was the first to pull away. His eyes were just about as red as Max imagined hers were at the time, but a wide smile was on his face.

“So…this girl that you have a crush on,” he said slowly, a mischievous smile on his face. “Does her name begin with a J?”

Max blushed furiously, staring at Will in shock. “How the—” she started to say as Will grinned gleefully at her. She wiped at her eyes, a rueful grin on her face. “Dammit Byers, why is it that I’m not able to pick out any girls for you but you’re able to guess who I like almost immediately?” she said in a mock-annoyed voice. Then she realized how stupid her question was and blushed harder. “Wait. Don’t answer that.” Will laughed, hard.

“I mean, if you think hard enough, you should be able to think of who I like…” Will said, looking down at his lap as he blushed. That’s when Max finally put two and two together. It made perfect sense to her as soon as she gave it a second of her thought.

“It’s Mike. You like Mike,” she said, understanding dawning on her. Will nodded slowly. Now, Mike and Jane, *that* was a perfect couple. And unlike her and Lucas, there was no indication that they were going to end anytime soon. “Fuck…we’re screwed, aren’t we?”

Will nodded slowly. “But…at least now we know we’re screwed together…” he said, giving Max a small smile. “And besides…when haven’t our lives been a little screwed up, anyway?”

“Damn straight,” Max said, a genuine smile overtaking her face. “Screwed together.”

Notes for the Chapter:

> Hey everyone! I hope you enjoyed this chapter from Max's perspective! I have a lot of fun writing her character, even if there were some not-so-fun moments in this chapter.
>
> Thank you all for the amazing reception for the first chapter! I have a lot of ideas for where I see this going and I hope you'll stick with this to see what I come up with. Moving forward, chapters are generally going to be split in between Max's and Will's perspectives with a healthy mix of fluff, angst, and comfort. As to whether there will eventually be Will/Mike and El/Max...I guess you'll just have to wait and see, now won't you? ;)
>
> I'm nearly midway through the next chapter, but I wouldn't expect it for a little while because I am very busy this coming week. I am working on it though, so please be patient! Your comments and kudos motivate me to keep writing, so if you have any feedback or suggestions on where you'd like me to take this feel free to let me know! :)

3. The Fallout

Notes for the Chapter:

> Major trigger warning for the very end of this chapter for implied self-harm. It doesn't get descriptive or anything, but I just wanted to warn anyone who might be sensitive to that sort of thing about it. Don't read it if you don't think you can handle it, it's basically just there to set up something that will happen later on in the story.
>
> Also, Mike is a dick in this chapter so bear with me.

Will's eyes slowly blinked open as sunlight pierced through the window of his room, pulling him out of his sleep. Slowly booting up like a slow Atari game, he groggily recognized that he was lying on his side, facing the window. Hoping to get a few more minutes of sleep, Will tried to turn over on his small bed, moving his face away from the sunlight…

…and falling out of the bed entirely and making impact with a once-peacefully sleeping redheaded girl, who was lying down on the mattress directly at the foot of his bed.

"GAH!" Max jumped, springing awake as if she had been given a jolt of electricity. Both she and Will were still frozen in shock, but Max was the first to fully comprehend what was happening. "BYERS!" she yelled, pushing the small boy ungently off of her.

Will yelped as he was shoved off of her, being propelled onto the ground with a loud oomph. "Max! I-I…" Will blushed profusely, embarrassed beyond relief. It was way, *way* too early for this shit.

"What the hell, dude? I was sleeping, y'know!" Max said in an annoyed tone as she sat up. "Plus, if you wanted to wake me up you could have just tapped me on the shoulder instead of falling on top of me!"

"I didn't *mean* to fall on top of you!" Will shot back, still red in the

face as he sat up as well. A mischievous thought crossed his mind, and he leaned over her mattress. “Besides, if I wanted to wake you up, I would have done *this*!” In a swift motion, Will grabbed the pillow Max was once sleeping on and whacking her in the head. Max was in shock for a moment, staring at Will with her mouth agape before she mirrored his smirk, grabbing the pillow that was lying on his bed.

“Oh, you’re so dead, Byers,” Max muttered, a sinister grin already on her face as she slammed the pillow into Will. Will tried to fight back, he really did, but now Max was in full attack mode. He tried to hit Max with his pillow, but his grip on it had become so weak that she ended up yanking it out of his hand and pummeling him with two pillows at once.

“Double pillow power, bitch!” Max proclaimed triumphantly as Will covered his face with his hands, giggling uncontrollably as Max didn’t yield. This was how most of their pillow fights ended until Will finally submitted.

“Okay, okay, I give up! You win!” Will managed to say, curled up in a ball on the floor as Max stopped, a wide smile on her face as she put the pillows down.

“Good,” Max said triumphantly, sticking her tongue out at him. “First you roll over on top of me and then you hit me with a pillow? Rude.”

“Well, next time tell the sun to not be so bright so I won’t have to roll over in the first place!” Will shot back, uncurling himself from his defensive position as he sat up. Max, naturally, shot back by telling him not to go to sleep on his side facing the damn window, to which he replied that he couldn’t control how he goes to sleep.

As the two bickered for a little bit, however, Will realized that something was different between them. Not bad different; in fact, the exact opposite of bad. Two days ago, he had come out as gay to her and she had accepted him, which would have been more than enough to make him happy. But then, yesterday, she miraculously came out to him, taking him completely off guard. And even though he knew that it was a little selfish to want someone close to him to be experiencing the same things he was…it felt *so* good to know that he

wasn't alone. Just thinking about it made him almost burst into tears of happiness again. The fact that he wasn't crazy, that he wasn't alone, that even if everyone else ended up abandoning him, she would still be there…it gave him hope.

Probably after hearing the two teenagers yelling loudly at each other, his mother knocked gently on the door to let them know that they had to get up for school. Taking turns in the bathroom, they eventually got out of their pajamas and into their regular clothes. By the time Will had gradually made his way out of his room and towards the kitchen, the aroma of his older brother's eggs and bacon was already in the air.

"What a wonderfully *eggs*-elent breakfast as always, Jonathan!" Will heard Max bellow from the kitchen, and he could just picture the self-satisfied smirk on her face and the corresponding grimace on Jonathan's face. As Will walked into the kitchen, his imagination did not disappoint him: Max was laughing to herself in pride at coming up with the pun, and Jonathan was groaning.

"Yeah, yeah, just eat the damn eggs, Mayfield," the older Byers boy muttered as he rolled his eyes, although there was a small smile on his face, even if he was trying to hide it. Will knew that it took a long time for Jonathan to warm up to people, but he had grown very fond of Max over the past year. They all had. As Will walked into the kitchen, grabbing his plate and quietly thanking his brother, Jonathan ruffled his hair affectionately as he went to make some coffee for his mom. As was routine on mornings like this.

As his mother left and the two of them had finished up breakfast, Jonathan drove them both to school, with Will's bike and Max's skateboard in the trunk. After coddling him for quite some time, Jonathan and his mom were generally okay with him biking to and from school on his own, although since Jonathan still had to go to school anyway they both appreciated the ride.

Once they were out of earshot of Jonathan, Max smiled gleefully at Will while also keeping her voice down. "So…excited to see Freckles today?" she whispered with a smirk on her face. Will immediately knew about whom she was talking about: "Freckles" was supposed to be Mike. And, needless to say, his heartrate did speed up

considerably at the thought of seeing Mike's lovely little freckles once again.

Will blushed furiously as he hit Max in the arm, but he had ammo as well. "Gee, I dunno, Max…" he said nonchalantly as the two of them walked into the high school. "Probably not as excited as you are to see Curls." Like Will, Max seemed to pick up on the codename of her crush almost immediately; it was not even a full day that they had both come out to each other, and yet they were already creating a secret gay code for themselves on the spot.

"Hey! Keep your voice down!" she hissed, whacking him back in the arm, although there was a grin on her face. She opened her locker and hid her face inside of it, and Will could tell she was blushing. "Ugh, I don't even…Curls? That's not, I…God, screw you, Byers," she managed to say awkwardly, muttering "Curls" under her breath once again for good measure. Looks like he had done a good job coming up with the nickname.

Will laughed at Max's flustered attitude, causing her to whip around and push him away. "Will, stop making fun of me!" she said, although she was grinning as some other mischievous thought came into her mind. "Or do you want me to whip out the other nickname I've thought for *him*, which is—"

Max paused mid-sentence, her smile fading as Will's snickers dissipated. He looked at her worriedly, but she wasn't looking at him: it was something, or someone, that had caught her attention behind him. Turning around, he saw the back of Lucas as he walked away from them. He probably hadn't heard any of the words they had been saying, he was too far away, but he had definitely seen them. And he had definitely heard them laughing amongst each other.

That's when all of the smiles, laughing, and banter stopped, and reality set back in. It had only been one day since Max had officially broken up with Lucas. The friend she had tried to trick herself into liking, but never had any deeper emotions for.

Will turned back around to see Max already back at her locker, shuffling books around with a sad, guilty expression on her face. "You okay?" he asked, concern etched on his face.

“Yep,” Max replied quickly, glancing at him. Will wouldn’t be so easily fooled, though, and he gave her a knowing look. She sighed. “I don’t know…I mean, no…” she admitted. “I feel like such a shit person. Lucas is my friend…or maybe, was my friend. He was the first one to befriend me out of everyone here, and without him I wouldn’t have met you, or Jane, or anyone else. And I betrayed him…for what? Just so I could try to be normal, even though all this time I know I’m still—” she choked on the word, looking around at the crowded hallway. Not many people had taken notice of them, but he knew she still felt anxious about saying that she was gay out loud out of fear of anyone overhearing. He would be, too.

Will sighed. “Max, it’s not your fault. You were…confused,” he said, lowering his voice for good measure so people didn’t overhear him as he leaned against the lockers. “And the minute you weren’t confused, you broke things off. That was the responsible thing to do. Lucas is *still* your friend…he just needs time to get over it.”

Max nodded painfully, although she still looked uncertain. Will felt his heart break for the girl as he berated himself inwardly. Why wasn’t he as good at helping her as she was at helping him? “Yeah… he told me yesterday that he needed some space,” she said, closing her locker as she grabbed her bag. “I probably won’t be at lunch today, but…you should go be with him and everyone else. He needs all of the support he can get right now.”

Will hated the idea of Max being on her own, but he nodded. She didn’t really seem to be in the mood to argue. “Okay…” he said reluctantly. Max smiled sadly at him.

“Will…I, uh, you’re a really good friend, you know that?” she said, a little awkwardly. Will furrowed his brow, and Max continued. “I…I don’t know what I did to deserve having you in my life. I don’t think I would be able to handle…*this* without you. Thanks for, y’know, uh…putting up with me.”

Will was more than a little startled by this, but immediately pulled Max into a tight hug. “You have nothing to thank me for, and you deserve every bit of me, Mad Max. We’re screwed together, remember?” he mumbled into her. The phrasing he had used earlier yesterday reminded him somewhat of him and Mike, although this

time, it was very different.

Max wrapped her arms around the small boy as she nodded. “Screwed together,” she reaffirmed. He knew she was hurting, but at least there was more of a genuine smile on her face. “Love you.”

“Love you too,” Will said quietly as he pulled away. Slowly, the two drifted their own separate ways, heading to their first period classes. They shared very few classes together, and when they did share classes they were in assigned seats across the room from each other, so he knew that he likely wouldn’t see Max for much of the rest of the day. Which fucking sucked, because he wanted to make her feel better.

Gradually, lunch came around, and as Max had told him, she didn’t show up. Will was the first one at his group’s small table, with Mike (or “Freckles”) sitting down soon after next to him. While the thought of him and Mike alone, even for just a little bit of time, was usually enough to cheer him up, the reminder of the drama between Max and Lucas put a damper on things. Not only that, but Mike didn’t seem to be in a very good mood. He put down his tray of food with a frustrated look on his face, as if he was angry at the food for existing. Yet another uncomfortable pit in Will’s stomach formed as he realized that Mike probably knew about the break-up.

In fact, it seemed as if everyone had heard about it as Lucas and Dustin came into the lunchroom. Young teens who walked past them couldn’t help but glance back and forth at them and then each other, whispering amongst themselves with very serious expressions on their faces. And Lucas? Well…he didn’t seem to be doing so well. After quickly grabbing their food, they sat down next to them at their table. El was the next to come in with a confused look on her face, carrying a brown bag that Hopper had likely prepared for her (she always brought her own lunch). She sat down next to Mike and Lucas, smiling at Mike and immediately noticing everyone’s glum and awkward expressions.

After a stilted silence at the table, El was the first one to speak up. “What is wrong?” she asked quietly, looking at everyone with a furrowed brow. She usually wasn’t one to speak much at the table, so she probably felt a bit out of her element trying to cajole the boys out

of their silence.

Will gulped as the others glanced at each other nervously. “Uh, well, haha, funny story actually, ya see...” Dustin started to say nervously in an effort to break the news gently, but Lucas lifted his hand up to silence him, tilting his head slightly to look at her.

“Max and I broke up,” Lucas said simply. Well, actually, it was far from anything simple. Will could tell that there was a lot of hurt and sadness behind that simple phrase. Eleven’s eyebrows immediately shot up.

“What? Why?” she asked immediately, looking at Lucas in concern. Mike looked like he was about to say something, but Lucas cut him off with a shrug.

“I dunno…she just said it’s over, and that’s that,” he said with a sigh, sending yet another pang of guilt through Will. Lucas didn’t know… but Will did. And he couldn’t tell him, or anyone for that matter. He could never betray Max’s trust like that, especially after telling her about him…but he still couldn’t help but feel bad for his other friend. Well, he felt bad for both Lucas and Max.

El suddenly stood up, grabbing her brown paper bagged lunch in one hand. “Well…I will find out,” she said resolutely, suddenly turning to Will. “Where is Max? Is she coming here?” He was surprised that she was asking him, as if he knew, but then he realized he could probably guess where she was. The bond between them was palpable, even to those who didn’t know what was beneath the surface.

“N-no…” Will let out, shaking his head. “She told me she wasn’t coming to lunch…if I had to guess, she’s probably at the back of the school outside.” Will wondered for a moment if the person Max needed right now was her crush, but decided it was best to tell her just because he didn’t want her to be alone right now either. Eleven smiled at him before turning away, walking purposefully away. Will’s eyes lingered worriedly at her as she left…and Mike’s did too, although with a different expression.

“Ugh, why does she even bother?” he said, scoffing back at Eleven as she left, out of her earshot. Will knew that the anger wasn’t directed

at her, but at someone else. “It’s not like it will change anything. What’s the point?”

“W-what do you mean?” Will asked, a little startled. Mike rolled his eyes.

“Come on, you know what I mean. She’s already caused so much damage. It’s not like we can let her back into the party after this,” he said, eyeing Will carefully.

Will quickly became agitated. He liked all of his friends, but…he wasn’t sure he could handle the day-to-day without Max by his side, especially after everything that just happened. “What? No!” he said, glancing over at Dustin and Lucas. Both had neutral expressions on their faces. “She’s our friend! Max is our friend!”

“*Was* our friend,” Mike corrected snappily. Will’s worried expression quickly turned to one of anger. At Mike, nonetheless!

“No, *is*,” Will insisted, glaring at the boy next to him. “She’s still my best friend, and she doesn’t deserve to be kicked out.” It took him a second to realize that he had actually called Max his best friend, something that was largely reserved for their knowledge. After all, before Max, he had always assumed that *Mike* was his best friend… and Mike seemed to think the same. But that thought only registered as soon as he saw Mike’s taken aback expression.

“Will…” Mike started to say, after a brief silence between them. “I thought *I* was your best friend.”

“I…I…” Will was at a loss for words. What was he supposed to say? His bond with that spunky, red-haired girl was nothing like his relationship with Mike. She understood him more than Mike ever could…there was no way Mike was like him. Watching him with El had hurt so bad this past year. *He was in love with Mike*. How could Will possibly be his best friend while hiding something like that from him?

“I’m allowed to have multiple best friends…” Will said weakly, trying to save himself. “You’re all my best friends. I don’t want to lose any of you…and that includes Max.”

“But Will, we’ve known each other since childhood!” Mike said insistently. “We all have! And Max, we’ve known her…how long? A year? Not even! She barely even knows us!” Will instinctively gritted his teeth.

“Oh? And El does?” he asked, his anger coming back to him very quickly. After all, they had only known her for a week before Mike had honorarily inducted her into the party…even when she was missing. And Will hadn’t even met her by that point.

“That’s…that’s different and you know it!” Mike said, caught off guard with surprise. That seemed to hurt quite a bit, and Will instantly felt bad and so held his tongue with the inevitable question of “how?” Even though he Mike could be an insufferable blockhead sometimes (like now), he still loved him. “The *only* reason that she’s here at all is because of Lucas! And now she broke up with him! There’s *no* other reason for her to be here now!”

“I still like her,” mumbled Dustin, suddenly the shy one of the group. Both Mike and Will whipped their heads towards the other side of the table, where both Dustin and Lucas looked extremely uncomfortable. “It sucks that she and Lucas broke up, but…that doesn’t mean we have to kick her out. She’s still our friend.”

Lucas sighed, keeping his eyes on his half-eaten food. “Yeah, Mike… she wasn’t just here because she was my girlfriend. She’s still gone through everything that we have. If you and El broke up, you couldn’t expect us to kick her out from the party, right?”

Mike’s cheeks blushed furiously. “I…no, that’s diff—”

“No, it’s not,” Lucas countered, shutting Mike up. “I’m not going to pretend that it doesn’t suck. But…I’d rather her be happy and not my girlfriend than unhappy and my girlfriend, right? I still have feelings for her, but I…I’ll get over it,” Lucas said, a finality to his voice that indicated that he was done talking about it. On the one hand, Will was relieved that he wasn’t alone on this; on the other hand, he was extremely guilty that he and Mike had likely only made Lucas’s coping with this worse. Max had asked him to be there for Lucas. But he wasn’t even able to do that. They were…no, *he* was making everything worse.

Ashamed, Will nodded, turning back down to his lunch tray. Every now and then he could feel Mike's gaze on him, and it definitely wasn't one of fondness. Mike was still angry at him. No, Mike *hated* him. He must hate him, Will thought. And it wasn't like he was on Dustin and Lucas's good side either. And as the lunch continued in silence, Will felt like he was the scum of the earth.

Leaning against the wall outside on the far side of the school, Max felt like the scum of the earth.

She had woken up this morning feeling great, terrific even. She had finally told someone about herself, someone she *knew* she could trust. She felt loved and accepted in the Byers household. She had felt great on the drive to school, and walking into school with Will…until she saw Lucas in the hallway. He saw her while she was smiling and laughing. *Laughing*, right after a breakup, for fuck's sake! And the hurt on his face seemed to amplify tenfold.

That's when the feeling like shit started…and it didn't exactly go away easily.

"Max?"

Jumping slightly, Max lifted her head up and looked towards the approaching individual: it was Jane. Or "Curls," as Will called her. Trying to control the instant blush she felt spread across her cheeks whenever she saw the curly-haired girl, she tried giving her a small smile. Jane looked at her worriedly.

"H-hey, Jane…" Max said quietly. Part of her couldn't help but feel glad that she was there, but another part made her only feel guilty that Jane had come to her. After all, *she* was the reason the main reason she realized that she needed to break up with Lucas. Although it's not like she wanted to tell her to leave.

"I heard. About Lucas," Jane said as she walked closer to Max. Her

smile faded away as she slumped against the wall.

“Yeah…” Max said as she lowered herself down to the ground. Jane sat down next to her, a concerned look on her face. Max glanced over at her. “How was he? Lucas, I mean.”

Jane pursed her lips. “Sad. He looked sad,” she said as Max grimaced. If there was one thing she could always rely on the telekinetic girl to give her, it was the cold, honest truth. Which she appreciated, although it sucked to know that Lucas was still hurting. “Max…why did you break up with him?”

Max sighed. She trusted Jane, but she wasn’t sure how much she should tell her without revealing everything, which she *definitely* couldn’t do. “It’s, uh, it’s complicated…” she said evasively, eyeing her cautiously. “I just don’t feel that way about him. It felt wrong to continue it when I didn’t feel the same way.”

“Oh…” Jane said as if she understood, but there was still a confused look on her face. She wanted more. “But…I thought you were happy with him?”

Max shuddered inwardly. “I, uh, yeah, but…not in the same way you and Mike are happy with each other…and not in the same way that Lucas was happy with me,” she said awkwardly. “I only saw him as a friend…I’m not sure I ever saw him as anything more.” Max’s eyes widened as she realized what she just said. Wait, was she really going to tell her about herself???

“Then why did you date him?” El asked, still confused as she furrowed her brow. God, she looked so cute when she did that…but Max’s mind was somewhere else now.

For the first time ever, Max considered telling Jane. About her feelings towards her? No, duh, of course not. Stupid idiot. That would ruin everything. Jane would end up hating her for real this time and tell Mike and then she would be kicked out of the party for good. But what if…she told her that she didn’t like boys? Would she judge her? Max figured not. She might not even understand her. Jane had grown up in a lab after all, far away from the bigoted views of the majority of society that had made her suppress her identity in the first place.

Wait, was she really thinking about the upsides of being tortured in a government facility and closed off from the rest of the world for the first thirteen years of your life? What the fuck was wrong with her?

No, stop. Focus on what's important. And in that moment, she thought that it might be a good idea to tell her.

"Jane…can you keep a secret?" Max asked cautiously, turning to face her. Oh, shit. She was doing this. "You can't tell anyone about this… even Mike. Especially not Mike. Okay?"

Jane furrowed her brow some more, but reluctantly nodded. "Okay… what is it?" she asked slowly. Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck. She was actually doing this. This really came out of nowhere. She hadn't mentally prepared herself at all! She should make something up. No, don't! Just tell her, you're already in too deep!

"Okay…" Max said, trying to take a deep breath. She kept glancing nervously at the girl sitting next to her, worried that she might read her like a book. "Um, this is going to be hard to explain…stay with me, alright?" Jane nodded. Max sighed again. "The reason I dated Lucas was because…well, I thought I could like him. But I realized only now that I couldn't. I wish I could, but I can't. I don't like…" Once again, she froze, like she had with Will for a moment. But this was different. Jane was her crush. And as much as she'd like to think she wouldn't judge, she didn't know that for sure like she had with Will.

"Max?" Jane prompted her, refocusing her. Max gulped. It was too late now. She needed to do it.

"Boys!" she blurted out, startling Jane as she jumped back. Max's face flushed, realizing that she was maybe being too direct. "I don't like boys," she repeated awkwardly.

Jane looked at her quizzically. "But…all of your friends are boys? Except me?" she said questioningly.

Max blushed more furiously. "No! I mean, yes! But I don't mean it like that," she said, embarrassed. "By like, I mean, boyfriend-type like. I don't like boys, uh, in that way. And I thought I could, but I

realized I don't, so that's why I broke up with Lucas. Because I don't like boys…I like girls. Meaning, I want a girlfriend, not a boyfriend," she finished, sucking in her breath and looking at Jane expectantly. Internally, she was freaking out. Holy shit, she had actually done it. She was mad. Mad Max, indeed.

But the curly-haired girl didn't seem to be fazed by what she had said at all, after she had let it all out. She simply nodded and smiled at her. "Okay. I understand," she said simply.

Flustered, Max stared at her disbelievingly. "R-really?" she asked, not fully buying that Jane could accept her just like that when it had taken her so long to even accept herself.

"Yes," she replied, concern returning to her face. She reached over and grabbed Max's hands in her own. "What's wrong? You're shaking…" Jane said. Max hadn't even realized it until she had said anything, but as Jane's hands wrapped around her own consolingly she felt her hands trembling and her body fidgeting. Max tried to take a deep breath to calm herself down, but being this close to the girl she loved wasn't making things easier for her.

"I guess, uh, I was just worried to see how you would react," Max managed to squeak out, trying her best to get her nerves the fuck under control. "The only other person who knows is Will. A lot of other people are grossed out by that, and I grew up around people who didn't like people that are…like me," she said, managing to still her hands within Jane's grasp.

Jane shrugged. "Well, I'm not…grossed out. It doesn't matter to me."

Max breathed a sigh of relief. At least she was able to trust one of her secrets with her. "Thanks…" she said, smiling at her as Jane pulled her hands away. "And you…you promise not to tell anyone?"

Jane nodded. "Promise," she said, giving her a reassuring smile. Max smiled back, grateful for having someone else in her life who accepted this part of her…even if she didn't know the full picture. But she was happy, and she needed it after everything else today. And Jane seemed happy too. Placing her brown paper bag into her lap, she seemed to be focused on another topic entirely as she pulled

out a small peanut-butter and Eggo sandwich; her favorite lunchtime meal that Hopper prepared for her. She split it in half. “Want some?” she asked.

Grinning, Max took the half of the sandwich she was offered. “Now that’s what I’m talking about,” she said, leaning against the wall. “Thanks.”

“Uh-huh,” Jane said in acknowledgement, taking a bite out of her half as she leaned against the wall as well, sitting directly next to Max. “Do you want a sleepover tonight?”

Max knew that she could only spend so many days away from the hell that she knew as home…but she was still riding off the high of telling Jane about herself. “Okay, sure,” she replied. “Thanks. Again.”

“Mmm,” Jane responded, her face stuffed with Eggo’s. Scooting closer to Max after she had wolfed down her half of the sandwich, she rested her head on Max’s shoulder with a contented sigh.

This girl would be the death of her.

Will had gotten home early today, skipping his last couple of classes and biking back to his house on his own. He had felt on edge ever since lunch, and he couldn’t take it anymore. Lying on his stomach on top of his bed, he stuffed his face into the pillow. Mike obviously hated him. Lucas and Dustin were probably disappointed in him. And Max…she had El.

Right after lunch, he had had Art, usually his favorite class, with El. Nervously, he had asked her how Max was doing, assuming she had found her during lunch. El cheerfully told him that she had found her and had managed to cheer her up somewhat, which didn’t surprise Will. She had even managed to cajole Max into having a sleepover with her, and what’s more, she surprised him by stating that Max told her the reason that she had broken up with Lucas: that she was gay.

Well, she didn't use those exact words, most likely because she didn't know them. Just that "I know she likes girls," which was enough to send Will into shock. But he was quickly able to figure out that that was all Max had told her. He should be happy for her, or so he thought.

On the one hand, he *was* happy for Max. It meant yet another friend who wouldn't turn Max away. But, at the same time, it was also a stark reminder that even if Max couldn't fall back on him, she had El. But who did Will have to fall back on? He had spent the past year drifting apart from nearly all of his friends as he got closer to Max. The emotions he had been dealing with throughout that year, his feelings for Mike, had made it difficult for him to socialize with them in even the most basic ways. Every time he imagined his friends' reactions, barring Max and now maybe El, if he were to tell them that he was gay, their faces were always contorted in disgust. Especially Mike's.

Will had nobody else. And the one person he trusted in his life didn't need him. He was just a burden, that's all he was. To Max, to the rest of his friends, to his family. It would be better off for everyone if he just–

"Will? Do you copy? Over," came Mike's voice, crackling over the Supercom that rested in the corner of his room. Will sighed into his pillow. He really didn't want to talk to anyone right now. But… maybe Mike could cheer him up. He had always cheered him up, right? Managing to lift himself up the bed, he grabbed the walkie-talkie device.

"Yeah, I copy…what's up? Over," Will responded into the Supercom, pressing down on and releasing the button on the side. He waited for a moment until he got back Mike's staticky response.

"Okay…I'm sorry if I upset you today. Over."

Will inhaled nervously before pressing the button to respond. "It's okay. I get it, you were upset too," he said, squeezing his eyes shut. This should feel good, right? Mike just apologized to him.

…so why did it still feel like there was this tension between them,

even when they weren't in the same room?

"Will?" Mike called out over the Supercom. "You're supposed to say 'over' when you're finished, remember? Over."

Will sighed. "Right. Sorry. Over."

"It's okay…" Mike said as static filled the line. It was then that Will realized that he hadn't called him just to apologize. "Will…" Mike continued. "Did you mean it? When you said that Max was your best friend? Over."

Will shuddered. How could he respond? What could he possibly say? "Mike, I-I…" Will stuttered, holding onto the button. "Mike, you're one of my closest friends. O-over."

His non-answer must have been enough. After a tense pause between them, Mike's voice came through again, with a slightly disappointed but unsurprised tone to his voice. "Okay. You are for me, too. I'll see you tomorrow, Will. Over and out." Will was left clutching the Supercom feebly as the connection went dead.

Will laid on his bed, arms sprawled out as he let the device fall to his bedside. He was worthless. Here he was, wallowing in his own self-pity as his friends abandoned him one by one. He should have been happy for Max for telling someone other than him about herself; instead, it made him believe that it was one more step towards her also realizing that it wasn't worth being his friend. Zombie boy, let alone fairy boy, had too much baggage. He would only drag her down. She would realize that soon, and she would have someone to replace him with. She might be his best friend now, but…how long would it last?

If Will wasn't so tired and drained, he would likely be crying to himself right now. How pathetic.

He needed something, anything, to take his mind off of this. Usually, that meant drawing. But he knew that if he made contact with paper and pencil he would end up drawing Mike…an individual who was quickly becoming a stranger to him before his very eyes. No. He needed something more. Something that would take the edge off.

Something that would not make him *think* so damn hard anymore. And only one thing came to mind.

Slowly, he got up, creaking open his door and poking his head out. “Mom? Jonathan?” he called out, walking quietly through the small house. “…Max?” His home responded to him with silence. Nobody else was there: just him and his thoughts.

His hands trembling, he walked into the kitchen and opened a drawer, his eyes honing in on the perfect object for the job. Ignoring his internal screaming begging him to close the drawer immediately, he grabbed the knife and made his way to his bathroom.

Notes for the Chapter:

> Hey everyone! First off, sorry for that ending!! This chapter's tone is definitely kind of strange, as it started off as fluff, then turned into angst, then went back to fluff for a bit, then back to major angst. I'm sorry for this roller coaster! Unfortunately every bad (and good!) thing that happens in here is necessary for the story to progress...let me just say that it gets harder for these characters before it gets easier. But there is a happy ending for everyone, I promise! :)
>
> To be honest, I think I might have written Mike as too big of a dick in this chapter. But don't worry, he'll get better in later chapters. He is a good boy deep down, why else would Will like him?
>
> Anyway, let me know what you thought of this chapter! I'm already working on the next chapter which I think will be a bit lighter than this previous one. Expect it eventually. Thanks for reading! :)

4. Will's Problem

Notes for the Chapter:

> Trigger warning: there is quite a bit of talk about self-harm, specifically cutting, during this chapter. If you don't want to read it, you really, really don't have to. Will starts talking about it when he is in the bathroom, and it really only serves the purpose to show his thought process behind it all and to explain how the ending of last chapter hadn't been his first time. Seriously, don't force yourself to read it if you are easily triggered by that sort of thing. It begins and ends during the section from Will's perspective in this chapter.
>
> That being said, enjoy! This is a long one...

“Thanks for the ride, Hop!” Max called out behind her as Hopper grunted from the driver’s seat. She and Jane plopped out of the rusty, old station wagon, Max carrying her skateboard in one hand as they walked towards the school. Last night had been…good. Or at least, as good as having a sleepover with an unrequited crush could be without many of the awkward moments. But Jane never really seemed to notice it. And from Max’s perspective, she definitely wasn’t very subtle about her attraction for the girl.

But surprisingly, nothing had changed between them. Max and Jane had carried on during their sleepover as they would have any other time she would have spent the night. Jane still insisted that they braid each other’s hair, watch television together snuggled underneath the same blanket, and sleep in the same bad together. Anytime Jane became even remotely physically intimate with her, Max would immediately become flustered; and the fact that Jane knew that she had a general attraction towards girls, for some reason, only made her blushes and awkwardness grow worse. And Jane seemed to be completely oblivious to all of it, even falling asleep on her shoulder as she snuggled up to the girl while they were both watching some dumb soap opera.

The fact that nothing had changed at all between them made Max question whether Jane really understood what she had told her. But when she asked her about it that night, Jane insisted that she did. And Max didn't have to be told twice. In fact, once she was reassured that Jane did understand what it meant to be gay, she was relieved that nothing had changed.

Deep in thought about the previous night, Max twirled her skateboard in her arms and then on the ground, kicking it towards the bike rack. Jane watched the object with fascination as it rolled away from them, and Max noticed. She gave her a little sideways smirk. "My offer's still open to help you learn how to ride it, if you want," Max said. It was something that she had offered her very early on in their friendship, and whenever she caught Jane looking at the skateboard she always brought it up again.

Jane shuddered, looking away. "Too scary…" she mumbled. Max laughed. Apparently, Jane was afraid of skateboards because she couldn't sit down anywhere like on a bike, and that made her feel less stable and safe. Max found this particularly funny because she figured that, if she really wanted to, she could use her mind powers to make herself stable on the skateboard, but whatever.

She was just about to open the door to the school and walk in with Jane, but a familiar voice from behind her stopper her. "Max."

She turned around and saw Lucas, surprising her almost immediately. She glanced over at Jane, who gave her a sympathetic smile and left the two of them alone at the front of the school steps. Lucas's expression was difficult to decipher…he didn't seem mad, or particularly distraught, although he didn't seem very happy either. More determined, than anything.

"Hey," Max said awkwardly, looking at him. She still felt horrible about it, for everything…but she wasn't sure what else she could say to him that would make it better without telling him about herself. Will was gay, so he understood; Jane had never been exposed to the homophobic views of society, so she didn't care; but Max still wasn't ready to tell anyone else, especially not Lucas. How would he react if he found out that he was once dating a lesbian who never really reciprocated any of his feelings?

“Hi…” Lucas said, almost as awkwardly. He didn’t stop her just to say hi: it was clear that he had a purpose, he just didn’t know the right words. He took a deep breath. “After you broke up with me, you said that you still wanted to be friends. You…you meant that? That wasn’t bullshit?”

Max’s eyes widened, and she quickly nodded. “Y-yeah! Of course I did. I still want to be your friend…” she said, looking at him with a mixture of hopefulness and uncertainty. “Lucas…do *you* still want to be friends?”

Lucas sighed, putting his hands in his pockets. “Well, I want to be more than *not* friends. And, I mean, eventually…yes?” He sighed again, looking at her. “Look, I won’t pretend that things won’t continue to be awkward between us. And I won’t pretend that I’m not still getting over this, because…well, I am. But…if you’re okay with knowing that, and you’re okay with being not *friends*, but more than *not* friends, at least for now, then…” Lucas looked like he was trying to find the right words, but eventually gave up. “All I’m saying is, the Party stays together, no matter what. I don’t want you to leave our friend group because of this.”

After being initially shocked at how straightforward and upfront Lucas was being, a wide, thankful smile managed to make its way across Max’s face. Good Lord, he would have been such a perfect boyfriend. “I…I’m okay with being more than not friends. Thank you,” she said gratefully. Lucas gave her a small smile in return.

“Don’t mention it,” he said, walking with her into the school. He draped his backpack around his back as he headed down the hall in the opposite direction. “So…I’ll see you at lunch?”

“Definitely,” she said, grinning as she waved him goodbye. “See ya!” As Lucas turned a corner, Max let out a breath of relief.

That went…well. Really well, actually. Sure, they might not exactly be best buds now, but at least now she wouldn’t feel a rush of anxiety whenever she saw him. Lucas had handled that very maturely, probably more maturely than Max would have ever handled a breakup, she had to admit. Maybe it wouldn’t be such a bad thing if he were to find out about her…but that would have to be for another

day. She still thought that it was best if Lucas didn't know quite yet… regardless, she was glad that they were at least gradually getting back on good terms with each other, and she knew the first person to talk to about this.

"Byers!" she said, making the small boy jump as she approached his locker. He obviously hadn't seen her coming. Max grinned. "Dude, I was just talking to Lucas and—"

Max froze as soon as Will turned away from his locker to look at her. Immediately, she knew something was wrong. It looked as if he hadn't gotten a wink of sleep. His gaze was droopy and unfocused, and his face seemed much paler than usual. Something was definitely going on with him as he stared silently at her.

"…what?" Will asked after Max hadn't continued for a beat of silence.

Max, still analyzing Will a little bit, had to tell herself to snap out of it. Maybe he was just tired. "Oh, uhh, yeah, he was just…really cool about everything," she said, getting her mind back on track. She leaned against the locker next to his. "He said that he wants to be friends…well, more than *not* friends. And he said it's cool if I hang out with you guys. So, I mean, after everything, that's, like, the best thing I can hope for, right?"

"Oh…yeah," Will said quietly, avoiding her eye contact as he shuffled a few things around in his locker. Will being quiet wasn't particularly unusual…but everything else about his demeanor was very different. Something was definitely wrong.

As Will was about to close his locker and walk away, Max held it open, stopping him. Will seemed to freeze. "Okay, dude, what's up?" she asked him, looking at him.

"N-nothing…" Will said, although it was obvious he was lying. His voice was wavering.

Max rolled her eyes, putting her hands on her hips. "Seriously? You're really gonna try that bullshit on me?" she asked rhetorically. "Did you have another nightmare last night?" she added quietly, not

wanting to get the attention of any nosy passerby.

Will's eyes widened. "What? No…" he said, his voice quiet. He still wasn't looking at her. "I told you, nothing's wrong…"

Max pursed her lips. This was definitely unlike Will. He almost always told her immediately whenever he felt wrong, especially if it was about a nightmare. She had figured that after coming out to each other, that would only increase the amount they would share with each other, but Will seemed to be as shut as a clam. As she glanced around at the teens walking past them, she figured that maybe it was everyone else around them that was pressuring him to stay quiet.

"Will, let's go outside. We can talk about whatever's going on out there, okay?" she said, and reached out to grab him by the arm. As soon as she gently touched it, however, Will jerked his arm away and turned away from her, slamming his locker shut.

"I-I have to go!" he said sharply, quickly running away and leaving a stunned and hurt Max in his wake, too surprised and caught off guard to follow him. Once she came to her senses, he was already long gone.

Something was definitely wrong. She didn't know what, but something was definitely wrong with her best friend. And Maxine Mayfield was determined to find out exactly what it was.

Properly reconcile with Lucas? Check.

Next on her to-do list was to hunt down and protect Will Byers.

Will ran into the boy's bathroom, the one place that he knew Max couldn't follow him. He heard the bell ring signifying the start of his first period class, but he was too shaken to leave the bathroom. In fact, his entire body was shaking. And his breathing was getting sharper and sharper…oh, crap. He was hyperventilating.

Snap out of it, Byers. Deep breaths. In, out. In, out.

Will closed his eyes, thanking the powers that might be that the restroom was empty. He focused on steadying his breathing. In, out. In, out. After a little while, his breaths became slower and more controlled, causing him to exhale in relief. Thankfully, he had experience with handling this. He had to deal with a year of trauma from running from the Upside Down, after all.

Will looked at himself in the mirror, and he was unsurprised to see that he looked like a piece of shit. His eyes were bloodshot, his hair was a mess, and he looked like he was going to puke. He knew why, of course. Last night had been a particularly bad episode.

After he had gotten back from the Upside Down, William Byers had picked up quite a few bad habits. One of them was secretly skipping classes every once in a while, even outside of the times he had to for his appointments at the Lab. Another habit was not eating as much as he probably should have, skipping entire meals at times. And a final habit he had discovered after he came back was that of the blade.

Will had begun cutting himself roughly a month after he had returned. He was alone at home, having coughed up yet another slug-like creature into the sink, reality flickering in and out around him. He felt like he was going insane. Rushing into the kitchen to get a glass of water…but instead found the knife lying on the counter. His eyes had immediately drawn themselves towards the object, a thought that had never crossed his mind suddenly bubbling up to the surface.

The urge he felt upon seeing the knife didn't make any sense. It defied all logic. But, then again, so did everything around him. So, he did what he felt he needed to do…and after that first time, he found it very hard to stop.

It was very hard to keep it a secret from others, particularly because he had very regular meetings with a doctor. But Will managed to not let anyone know…barely. Dr. Owens had seen Will's arms before he had had the good sense to cover them in band-aids and bandages, but Will had brushed them off as scrapes from tree branches while roughhousing in the woods with his friends. He knew that the Doctor and the Lab were smart, and that his excuse was flimsy, but Dr. Owens never brought it up again outside of the first time that he

noticed. Either he had fallen for it, or he knew exactly what the bandages on his arm were covering and believed that there were more pressing issues to attend to (although Will liked to believe that it was the former, he was fairly certain that it was the latter).

Hiding it from his Mom proved to be even more difficult, especially because during that year she was hovering over him nearly all the time. She did all of his laundry, which meant that Will had to be extra careful in wrapping up his bandages around his arms so that the cuts wouldn't bleed onto his clothes or bedsheets. Will would spend all of his allowance money on bandages and First-Aid Kits out of paranoia and tuck them away in a box deep in his closet…along with the knife. He got into the habit of wearing long sleeves, even in the summer, to cover the bandages that covered his scars. It raised a few eyebrows, but otherwise did not grab much attention. Will did avoid swimming that summer, though.

Will put in a lot of effort into making sure no one knew about his cutting…and at the end of the day, he really didn't know why. All of that effort could have been used on something else if he had just decided not to cut. But it wasn't so easy to stop. Every time he had felt stressed, or if the world was bugging out on him, or if he felt he was losing his mind, his body told him to cut; and every time he did it, he felt an inescapable rush that relieved that stress. He knew it would be back; it always came back. There had been too many close calls to count, and it should have been a sign that he should stop… but during that year, he just couldn't.

Things got better after a couple of things happened. The first was that he realized that he wasn't entirely crazy: there was some supernatural monster that was still after him. The event of last fall had provided him with another slew of trauma, but after it, he felt that at the very least he wasn't insane. He didn't stop entirely, but things got better for him. And then, of course, he had met and bonded with Max.

Even before he knew that the two of them were more similar than either of them had thought, he had always seen her as a kindred spirit. Someone who respected him, cared about him without treating him like a wounded toddler. He never told her about the cutting… mainly because he didn't have to. It slowly became less and less of a problem in his life, until he came to the point where he thought he

had stopped it entirely. He didn't have too worry anymore about people touching his arms, or being forced to wear long sleeves (although he still liked to wear them), or any of the other mechanisms he had developed to hide the fact that he was a cutter.

He thought he had lost the urge to do it. He really, really thought that he was all better. He had enough problems in his life, dealing with his sexuality and his crush, that he was actually thankful to have that problem taken care of. He thought it was in the past, just like the Demogorgon and the Mind Flayer; a relic of everything that was driving him insane.

Then last night happened.

He didn't know what had caused it. Maybe it was his friendship with Mike, that was deteriorating by the day. Maybe it was that, after telling Max, everything had just become so unbearably *real*. Maybe he, in at least a small way, resented the fact that Max could tell El about herself while Will could barely maintain a conversation with Mike these days. If Will was honest with himself, it was probably a combination of all of these thoughts swirling around his dazed mind at the moment. He didn't know. He wasn't sure about anything right now.

He just knew that last night…it was the worst he had felt in a long, long time. He barely slept a wink, mostly just crying to himself in shame. His mind was still stuck on that release as he held the knife in his hand. The feeling was always weird to describe…it was a mixture of fear, disgust, euphoria, calmness. It made him want to vomit and breathe a sigh of relief at the same time.

God, Will really, *really* hated himself.

Slowly, Will pulled up the sleeves of his shirt and jacket, revealing the faintly-bloody bandages wrapped around his forearms. He remembered that he had gotten particularly rough with himself last night. It felt worse now than at almost any point when he had been dealing with the slugs and the flashbacks to the Upside Down, despite the problem now being much, much smaller in comparison. His cuts this time were deeper, he could just feel it…making up for lost time.

Will slowly unraveled one of the bandages, but quickly wrapped it back around at the first sign of the scar. Seeing himself like this again was absolutely terrifying. It was as if nothing had changed, he had made no progress over that year. Not to mention what someone would think if they walked into the bathroom all of a sudden. At that thought, Will quickly pulled his sleeves back up.

He splashed some water on his face. He needed to snap out of this. He had a full day of school. Jonathan and his Mom had noticed that he seemed extra tired today, and Max was already suspecting something was up. He couldn't let any of them find out.

Drying off his face with paper towels, he looked at himself in the mirror. *In, out.* He still didn't look good. His eyes were still red. *In, out.* But he looked a little bit better. Combing his hands through his hair, he exited the bathroom.

Mike was the last person he expected to be standing out in the hallway after everyone had left for class.

He didn't seem to be aware that Will was in the bathroom, but he saw him come out immediately. Mike and Will locked eyes, both boys a little startled.

"M-mike!" Will nearly yelped the freckled boy's name in surprise. He instantly regretted it. The fact that he had actually addressed him now meant that he had to say something. Of course, it was hard to come up with something to say to the cutest boy in school anyway, but now that he felt that the two were drifting apart, it was especially hard. "I, uhh, shouldn't you be in class?" he asked lamely.

Mike raised an eyebrow. "Shouldn't you?" he countered, without any trace of the nervousness Will felt well up inside of him.

Will's stomach plummeted. "I-I-I, umm, I was in the bathroom," he said quickly. There was no way he was getting into all of that… especially not with Mike.

"Well, I was late," Mike said simply, furrowing his brow as he regarded Will. "Are you okay? You look a little funny."

That was a nice way of saying he looked like shit. Will's eyes widened in panic. "I'm good!" Will snapped, opening and closing his mouth in the blink of an eye. Mike looked startled again, and looked like he was going to say something, but kept his mouth shut.

"Alright," he said finally, sighing to himself. Without another word, Mike turned around and left, presumably for class. Something about the way he left was startling to Will…and also surprisingly devastating. It was as if Mike knew that Will was hiding something but had long accepted that he wouldn't tell him. It only served as a reminder of the distance that had been created between the two… and it was all Will's fault.

For a split second, Will wanted to stop him. Not only to tell him that he wanted to bridge that gap, but also that he wanted to tell him the truth. That everything was not alright. That he was gay. That he loved him. That he had cut himself last night and he was so, so scared.

But he couldn't. He could never do that. And so, Will said nothing. And Mike walked away from him.

And Will knew that, later that night, he would be taking that knife out from his closet again.

Yeah, so Will was definitely avoiding her. And Max was pissed as hell.

She hated being aggressively protective of the small boy, she really did. She usually respected his privacy when he didn't want to talk to her, just as he usually respected her privacy when she didn't want to talk to him. But this was the most shaken-up she had seen Will in a long time. He had had calmer nerves when he had come out to her, and that in and of itself was saying something. Plus, they weren't supposed to have any secrets between them anymore. Sometimes, she knew that she needed to push him to open up to her, for his own sake. And this was one of those times.

They didn't share many classes together, but in the few that they did share Will came in during the last minute that was possible without him being late and left the minute class let out, leaving no time for Max to corner him. And during lunch, Will stuck around with everyone else, giving her no time to be able to talk to him one-on-one. It's not like Max could talk about the various things that he might be going through (his nightmares, his sexuality, Mike) with everyone else listening in. Damn it, Will Byers. That boy could be quite sneaky when he wanted to avoid talking about what was wrong with him.

As school finally let out, Max was determined to find Will. But she couldn't find him anywhere. She scoured the school hallways, asking Dustin, Jane, Lucas, and even Mike if they had seen him. None of them had. Frustrated, she ran outside, only to find Will by the bike rack before anyone else. He must have rushed outside, knowing that she was on his tail.

The two locked eyes immediately. Max's gaze was determined. Will's eyes were red, tired, and scared. He looked like he was on the verge of breaking down as he wobbly held his bike in his hands. Oh, this boy was *definitely* in need of some platonic love and affection right now. Will didn't move, and Max marched with determination over to the bike rack…

…only to be interrupted by a loud, obnoxious honk and the screeching of tires from a car.

Max jumped, turning abruptly to see the familiar sleek 1979 Camaro stopping by the curb in front of her. The passenger door swung open, and she saw Billy in the driver's seat. Perfect. Hopefully she could just ignore him.

She looked back over to Will, only to find out that he had already taken off, heading on his bike in the opposite direction. Even more perfect.

"Get in," Billy called to her from the car, lowering his cheap sunglasses to get a good look at her obviously pissed-off expression. Max seethed with rage as she approached the car.

“What are you doing here?” she asked, scowling at her step-brother. He had graduated (barely) from school last year, although he still lived in the Hargrove-Mayfield residence, probably more so than Max. But ever since he had graduated, their normal routine of him driving her to school had significantly decreased, with Max opting to ride to school with literally anyone else that offered. Or, if she spent the night at someone else’s home, which was often, she would just go to school with them. Billy never picked her up.

“Dad told me to pick you up,” he said with a tired expression on his face. “Said that you’ve been staying out of the house for too long. Now get the fuck in.”

Max gave him the finger.

Billy sighed. “Look, Max, I would really, really recommend that you get in the damn car,” he said, repeating the command. Max looked at him indignantly in response to his thinly-veiled threat. Billy had mostly stayed out of her business since last Fall after she had quite literally knocked him out, and so she was surprised that he was even trying to do this now.

“Really? You’re really going to pull that shit with me?” she asked, snorting at him. “I thought I told you to stop messing with me, remember?” She expected Billy to get angry at her, slam the car door in her face and drive away, but he just kept looking at her with that same, vague expression. She was about to walk away, but he spoke up before she could.

“It’s not me you have to worry about,” Billy responded quietly. Max looked back at him, but his expression was unreadable. The sunglasses helped with that. His voice was still as passive and indifferent as always, but…she thought she had detected the smallest bit of fear there. She knew immediately who he was referring to: Neil.

Sorry, Will. I’ll come get you soon.

Grabbing her skateboard from the bike rack, she walked back to the car and wordlessly got into the passenger’s seat, shutting the door behind her. Billy sped off towards her “home” and the rest of the car

ride was spent in silence, save the revving of the engine. Billy hadn't even put on any music.

Max knew when she decided to spend the night with Jane last night that it would be risky, especially because she had spent the night at Will's the previous day. She hadn't been home in two days. Neil was angry; even though he had never shown her an ounce of love or appreciation, he didn't like her being away for too long because it broke the "perfect family dynamic" that he had worked *so* hard to establish. It was pretty obvious that he had taken it out on Billy. And probably her Mom, if she had to guess. If there was one person she would be more pleased to knock out than Billy, it would have to be Neil.

Everything she hated about Billy, the racism, misogyny, the drunkenness from time to time, all of it, could also be applied to Neil. Except coming from him, it was always worse. He was an adult, he was supposed to be the mature one. But he wasn't mature in the slightest. Whenever he didn't get what he wanted, whether it was something at work or there was something not making them the perfect nuclear family, he would take it out on said family. Mostly it was just yelling, but every now and then, when he was drunk, things would get violent. That's usually when Max ran over to Will's. But Billy didn't have that sort of sanctuary. She did feel sorry for her estranged step-brother, even if he was an asshole, too. He just wasn't as big of an asshole as Neil.

As Billy parked the car in the driveway of their house, Max instantly reached for the door handle. Billy stopped her. "Don't go out of the window immediately as soon as you get in," he said, looking at her. "You're at least going to have to stay for dinner."

"Yeah, whatever," Max said, rolling her eyes as she got out of the car, storming up towards the house. She decided to ignore Billy's pointed calls of "I'm serious!", because unfortunately she did understand. And she wasn't planning on leaving just yet. She was going to lock herself in her room until dinner, eat dinner with her *loving, adoring* family, and then slip out of her window afterwards to go see Will. The only person who really mattered in this whole mess. But he had to wait, for her own safety, just for a little bit. Groaning as she opened the door to her room, she quickly locked it so Billy couldn't come in and

plopped down on her bed.

The more she had thought about it, the more she saw the Byers as much more of a family than her actual one. Neil emotionally abused her, Billy emotionally abused her, and her Mom enabled them both, having long given up any role of actually parenting her. Joyce was an *actual* mother. Jonathan was an *actual* brother. And Will was like the twin brother she never knew she needed. If Max could, she easily would have chosen to be born with the Byers. Even if they had an asshole for a Dad as well, at least he was out of the picture now.

Her heart longed to be with them. With Will in particular, because she knew he was hurting. But she was worried that if she left home now without Neil at least seeing her present at dinner, then there would be a reckoning for her to pay. Getting the Walkman Will had gifted her a while ago out of her backpack, she put on her headphones and listened to some music, trying to pass the time until she was forced to the dining room table.

Eventually, that time came. She heard the front door thrust itself open, and then slam itself shut, followed by the sounds of footsteps that pounded into the hardwood floor of the hallway. Max felt a shiver run down her spine. The beast had arrived.

“Boy! Is Maxine here?” Neil barked loudly at Billy. He was loud enough to make the headphones not cancel out the noise. Sighing to herself, she took them off.

“Yeah, she’s in her room!” she heard Billy call out to him. This was followed by another set of loud footsteps, this time growing louder and louder until they stopped at her door. Max gulped.

“Maxine! Open up!” He seemed angrier than usual. And that was saying something.

Jumping from her bed, Max quickly rushed to unlock and open her bedroom door. There stood Neil Hargrove, in all of his ogre-ish glory, looking down at her with steely cold eyes. There was a bit of silence between them before Neil spoke quietly in a cold, icy voice that could cut through granite.

“Your mother is bringing home Chinese. Dinner will be in half an hour,” he informed her. What should have been a casual message that any other family would have delivered with a small smile was subtly overlaid with venom. All the while he was staring her down, maintaining eye contact, daring her to not appease him.

“O-okay. Thanks,” she responded quickly, hoping that this would be the end of the stand-off. Once again, there was silence between them, with Neil simply staring at her. After a tense moment, however, Tropical Storm Neil left, stomping off over to the television in their living room. Max closed her door right away, locking it again.

Oh, Neil was mad. He was really, really mad.

Half an hour passed, and her Mom came home with Chinese take-out. Usually, she loved having Chinese food…but only when it was with the Byers, or her friends. Or practically anyone else, outside of her family. She hated eating anything with them. Even though she knew that she had to do it, at least sometimes.

As Max left her room to come into the kitchen, she saw her frail, fragile mother put down the white plastic bags with the food. She turned over to her with a weak smile out of pure obligation. She called her names like “sweetie” and “honey,” but the pet names didn’t have any of the warmth that they had when Joyce called her them. If you offered Max $100 to tell you if her own mother still loved her or not, Max wouldn’t be able to answer because she honestly didn’t know. She wasn’t sure if her mother knew either.

Billy was already at the table, looking about as sour as ever. He was slumped over in his seat, glancing over at her and then back at his plate. Neil had a beer bottle in his hand and, judging by the number of bottles on the counter that had magically appeared since she had arrived, it looked like it was his third. Grimacing, Max sat down at the table.

Neil Hargrove was an alcoholic, that was for sure, but he was not a sloppy alcoholic. He was a silent, brooding drunk. But that didn’t make him not dangerous. In fact, he had a tendency to be quite violent when he was drunk and “in the mood.” Max had remained mostly unscathed, save some hard slaps and one black eye a couple of

year ago; she knew that Billy and her Mom were not usually so lucky. Billy used to be the person she really had to look out for, but after last year he stopped physically harming her.

As soon as the Chinese was placed on the plate in front of her, Max begin eating quickly. The sooner that she finished, the less she would have to deal with them, the quicker she can ask to be excused and sneak out the window to go see Will. Of course, though, drunk Neil would have to get in the way before she could do that.

“Where were you last night, Maxine?” Neil said with a slight slur, not touching his food as Max stuck a mouthful of rice in her mouth. “Were you with that boy, whatsisname…Sinclair?” She swallowed the food just as quickly as it went in. She was never exactly sure how he had found out that she had been dating Lucas, but once he did find out, he was very open about his disdain for the boy. And the reason was obvious and made her loathe him even more.

“No, we broke up,” Max said simply, using her fork to stab a piece of chicken. She hoped that by telling him this it might make him lighten up on her.

Neil snorted, sipping his beer. “Good. We don’t want those type of people associated with us…” he said, mostly to himself. Max used all of her energy to restrain herself from spitting into his face. He didn’t have to elaborate, and Max really hoped that he didn’t, because that restraint would be even harder to maintain. There was a silence at the table and Max thought she was in the clear. Her Mom looked like she was about to say something, but then Neil started talking again. “You didn’t answer my first question, girl.”

Max gulped down another bite of food. “I was with Jane,” she answered honestly.

“The kid that Chief Hopper adopted? Mmm,” he groaned, looking down at his plate. He still hadn’t touched it. The tension around the table was thick, and no one dared say anything as Neil spoke up again. “You know, I’ve heard some things about that girl…smart girl. Awfully strange how a police chief would decide to adopt her, though. Makes you wonder why she was out on the streets in the first place.”

Max looked up from her plate but said nothing. Where the hell was he going with this? Neil regarded her silence for a moment, but then took a forkful of rice into his mouth and started chewing it.

“One of the rumors floating around is that her parents kicked her out because she was a dyke,” he said while chewing, although the last word could have practically been spit out along with some of his rice.

Max froze. Her Mom and Billy had their faces practically glued to their plates.

“Well, the people who told you that are wrong. She has a boyfriend,” Max informed him. Her plate was almost done, only one dumpling and a little bit of rice left. She just had to finish it and ask to be excused, and then she wouldn’t have to put up with this bullshit…

Neil shrugged, a bemused expression on his face. “If that’s the case, then you may be right,” he conceded, poking at his food with his fork. Max plopped the dumpling into her mouth. “Although, you never know…I’ve heard of depraved women that use men as a camouflage, to disguise the fact that they are actually lesbian. Who knows…maybe this Jane Hopper is one of those undercover dykes,” he said, chuckling to himself as he sipped his beer.

Max suddenly felt her hands shaking. That hit way too close to home…there was no way he actually knew, right? He couldn’t possibly…he was just trying to get under her skin. He was just being an asshole, like he always was. She decided the best way to respond is to not respond. She couldn’t let him do this to her…she was afraid what might slip out if he got her riled up. Scooping up the last bit of her rice and eating it, she stood up from her seat.

“May I be excused?” she asked, looking at him. Neil, who had been chuckling, suddenly grew dead serious once again as he fixed Max with those cold, manipulative eyes. She felt him studying her, trying to probe for any weaknesses. Max hid her hands in her pockets so he couldn’t see the shaking. Neil stared at her for what felt like the longest, most drawn-out thirty seconds of her lifetime, until he relented, turning back to his food.

“Put your plate away,” he muttered as he stuffed more food in his

mouth. Keeping her breath in, Max picked up her plate, put it by the sink, and then walked quickly back to her room. She only let out her breath as soon as she had closed and locked the door.

Grabbing her skateboard and stuffing a new change of clothes in her backpack, she immediately jumped out the window and ran the hell out. The air was nippy, but the overwhelming sense of freedom that she felt from being outside of that suffocating house was amazing. She was out of that hellhole, at least for now, and she could focus on what was really important: Will.

Will's house wasn't too far away from her own, so it was never too much of a problem for her to sneak out in the middle of the night to his place whenever she was feeling sad. Although Joyce was amazing, she often preferred to cut out the middleman and just knock on Will's window. And because she didn't know what she was dealing with yet, she thought that this would probably be the best option.

She glided briskly over to the Byers' home on her skateboard and stopped as she reached the driveway. It was already pretty dark. Sneaking around the back of the house, she quickly found Will's window. The blinds were down. Max found that a little strange, but not completely abnormal. She tapped gently on the window. Loud enough for whoever was inside to hear, but not loud enough for anyone else to hear.

Max heard the sounds of scuttling in the room, and suddenly the blinds slid over to the side. There he was. Unsurprisingly, Will, wearing a brown long-sleeve sweater, didn't look much better. He still had that same sick, pale look that he had this morning; if anything, he looked a little worse. He looked pretty startled to see her, but Max showing up unannounced at his window at night wasn't *too* uncommon…okay, it sounded weirder in her head than it actually was. But whatever had been bothering Will in the morning was obviously still bothering him today.

Will opened the window, poking his head out to look at her. "M-max? What are you doing here?" he asked, his voice trembling slightly.

Max sighed. "Well, that's one way of saying 'hello'," she said

sarcastically, smirking slightly as she pulled herself up through the window, making Will jump back in surprise. Was he expecting her to just knock on his window and leave? Why was he acting so weird? She fell through the window with an "oomph," and was about to look back at Will and send another snarky comment his way, but Will seemed to be freaking out. "What is it?"

"Y-y-you're not s-supposed to b-be here…" Will said, his voice shaking as he stepped back away from her. His breathing was getting louder and quicker, and it didn't take Max long to realize that he was beginning to have a panic attack. She quickly got up from the floor of his bedroom and rushed over to him, holding him by the shoulders to try to stabilize him as the two of them sunk to the floor.

"Hey…you're okay…just focus on your breathing, okay?" Max asked, looking carefully at Will. Maybe she shouldn't have come over…he was in a really bad place right now. For a moment, she thought that maybe she was only exacerbating these bad feelings. But what's done was done. She needed to focus on Will right now. "In and out, like me, right? In, out. In, out," Max said, inhaling and exhaling deeply while looking the short boy in the eyes so he understood. Slowly, his breathing slowed down as he closed his eyes, backing away from the attack. They had both helped each other far too often that they knew how to make it stop fairly quickly, although this one in particular had Max worried.

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have come in unannounced," Max said quietly, rubbing Will's shoulder. Once she was confident that he was breathing normally again, she leaned in for a hug. Will hugged her back, shutting his eyes tightly. At least that was something.

"It's okay…I'm glad you're here…" he murmured, letting out a deep sigh as he rested his chin on her shoulder. Max smiled. That was the Will Byers she knew and loved. She wasn't sure what had spooked him, but whatever it was, she knew that now they would be able to work through it together.

"Good," she said, grinning at him as she got up before him. "So, next on the agenda is—"

Max froze, the corner of her eye catching the glint of something shiny

and metallic lying on Will's bedside table. She hadn't noticed it coming in, largely because she had been so preoccupied with Will. But she saw it now, and the object made her blood run cold. She really, really hoped that it didn't mean immediately what she thought it meant, but slowly, the pieces began to click together in her head. All she knew for certain, though, was that Will needed her help, badly. Turning back to her scared friend, she looked at him closely while trying her best to maintain a calm voice.

"…why do you have a knife by your bed?"

Notes for the Chapter:

> Finally, at long last I am done with this chapter! I am sorry to leave you all on a cliffhanger, but it was getting so long and plus I think it's good to end this chapter here for pacing purposes. There is a lot of angst in this chapter, both Will-related and otherwise, but the next one will have a lot of comfort and fluff, so keep your eye out for that!
>
> I am really, really sorry that this chapter took so long to come out, especially after ending the last one the way I did. The fact of the matter is, I ran into a writer's block very early on and it made it very difficult for me to write about it. So I put a bit of time into a couple other projects (not Stranger Things related), but the other day I finally passed through this writer's block and have been writing like heck the past few days. So, I'm back!
>
> Unfortunately, these next few weeks are insanely busy for me because I have a lot of schoolwork, but I will try my best to update this as soon as I can. Even if there is a long gap between chapters, though, just know that I am still working on this. I don't plan on abandoning it until everything's all wrapped-up in a neat, gay little bow.
>
> Please let me know if you liked this chapter by leaving kudos (if you haven't) and comments! If you

want the next chapter out sooner rather than later, it's really good motivation to hear that people like what I write! And also let me know if I made any grammatical mistakes, these last few days have been a total blur of writing this thing so I may have overlooked some :P

5. Long Talks

Notes for the Chapter:

> Like last chapter, I would like to add a trigger warning for this chapter in regards to self-harm, which is a big theme of this one. THAT BEING SAID, there is not really anything as descriptive as there was in last chapter (or at the end of Chapter 3), and what's mainly being talked about here are the emotions/feelings Will is experiencing while he is cutting as opposed to anything graphic. Still, if you are easily triggered by this sort of thing, please proceed with caution.
>
> Thank you for the nice comments on the last chapter, even if it was filled with tons of angst. Without further adieu, here is Chapter 5.

Will's entire world stopped as soon as he noticed Max's eyes lock on the knife. He nearly began hyperventilating again.

This wasn't supposed to be how she found out…no, no, she wasn't supposed to find out at all. He had been careless. He hadn't cut that night, yet, but he had been about to before Max showed up. The knife had *literally been in his shaking hand*…when he had heard something at his window. He originally thought that it was nothing, but Will, jittery as ever, decided that maybe he should at least check, just to make sure. And sure enough, Max was there, taking him completely off guard. He had opened the window out of pure instinct, but not before hiding the knife.

He had noticed it before she did, which is what caused his panic attack…but the panic attack had prevented him from attempting to hide the knife at the last minute. So once Max was done tending to him, she had seen it almost immediately.

"Will. Answer me," Max said, standing up over him. "Why…why the *fuck* do you have a knife in your room?"

Will flinched as Max cursed, the swear word hurting almost as much as the blade. Max seemed to notice because she immediately seemed to soften her expression. “I’m sorry…” she said, kneeling down back to where Will was sitting on the ground. “Please…please just talk to me, Will…” she said, her voice calm but also pleading as she gently grabbed his hands. Will’s body shuddered.

He wished that, at that moment, he would just sink into the floor, out of existence and out of sight. Or maybe he could be transported to the Upside Down again. Just let him teleport to anywhere or have anything happen that could in any way change the course of future events and allow Will to avoid the conversation that they were about to have. But that wasn’t going to happen. Will was stuck there, with Max…or, more accurately, Max was stuck with the sloppy mess that was Will Byers.

Although probably not. Once Max found out that Will was a cutter… he would lose her for good. She wouldn’t want to be associated with such a freak, or such an emotional burden. On top of everything else, it would be the straw that broke the camel’s back. She could always stay over at Jane’s house whenever things got hairy with her family.

“Y-y-you’re gonna hate me…” Will stuttered, his voice barely a whisper as he felt his eyes become very wet. “I…I know you’re g-going to think I’m a f-freak if I tell you…”

“Will, shut the hell up.”

Blinking his tears back, Will looked over at her in surprise. Max looked Will dead in the eye.

“After everything we’ve been through, every secret you’ve told me… you think I could ever possibly hate you?” Max asked him rhetorically. Will’s lip quivered. “That is, without a doubt, the most bullshit thing I have ever heard come out of your mouth, and you’ve said some pretty stupid things. Remember when you said that you confused Abraham Lincoln and George Washington during an American history test?”

Despite himself, Will laughed shakily. He nodded, a small, embarrassed smile on his face. “I t-told you, I missed that day of

class…" he muttered in his defense. Max gave him a sideways glance.

"Yeah, okay, still not an excuse," she said with a small smirk before she became serious once again. "But I'm serious. That right now, about you 'knowing' that I'll hate you? Dumbest thing to ever come out of your mouth. I would never, *ever* hate you. I don't think it would possible for me to hate you. We've been through too much together. You know me better than anyone else in this entire world, and the fact that you think that honestly makes me want to punch you."

Will winced. "Please don't," he said quietly, although there was a shy smile on his face.

"Fine. Then hug me," Max said, waiting patiently. Will smiled thankfully. That was something he could do, easily. Reaching over to her, he stretched his arms out and wrapped them tightly around the girl, with her hugging back instantly. Will cried quietly in her arms, a surge of relief pulsating through his veins. Although he still had something very, very hard to do. And Max brought him back to reality with that question he so dreaded.

"Can we talk about the knife?" she asked quietly, both of the teens still swaying in each other's arms. Will sighed, and he was thankful that his face was hidden from her for at least a brief moment. He shivered, which made Max only hug him tighter.

"I-I-I'm scared," he admitted in a tear-stained voice. "I…it's kinda like when I told you I'm gay, y-y'know? But…this feels so much worse…I don't want you to judge me, and I feel like you might."

Max hummed in understanding, rubbing her hand on his back for comfort. "I…I get that," she admitted. "But Will, I won't judge you. I know you're scared, but…I want to help you, even if you're scared of getting that help. Isn't that how our friendship started in the first place? I promised that I wouldn't judge you or baby you, even if the others might without realizing it. I still mean that." She took in a deep breath. "I promise, we'll work through this together, just like we do with everything. If I'm honest, I think I already know what this is about at this point. But…I just need to make sure I'm right."

At this point Will was midway through a very ugly cry as he nodded against her, overwhelmed with emotions and love for his friend. Maybe…if she already knew, and Will was almost positive that she did, then maybe she was telling the truth. No, she was. Max was his best friend, and he trusted her so, so much. Their friendship was built upon that deep trust between each other, and in that moment, Will realized that he was silly for thinking that Max would be lying to him. He sucked in his breath. He was still scared, but he knew that he needed to be honest with her, too.

"I-I'm not sure I could ever find the right words to say it…" he admitted, shuddering. "But…maybe I could show you?" In hindsight, Will thought that the phrasing was a little funny. Under literally any other circumstances, what he said could have easily shown up in a cheesy romantic comedy. The conversation would just have to not be between two gay people of the opposite sex and the topic of conversation would have to not be about the knife in his room.

Max nodded, and Will pulled away from the hug. Looking at Max, he could tell that her eyes were red and puffy, telling him that she had been crying too. Will closed his eyes, taking in a deep breath for every ounce of courage that he had. Sitting across from her on the floor, he began pulling up the sleeves of his sweater, showing Max the bandages. The blood stains were still only a faint red, but they were noticeable.

Max's sharp intake of breath made Will look up from his arms at her worriedly. "I'm sorry, it's just…I guess I was still a little caught off guard," Max said sadly, looking at him carefully. "Can you, um…take them off?"

Will nodded, slowly unwrapping the white material from his arms. One by one, his cuts unmasked themselves, becoming visible to both of them. Each one made him sick to his stomach and made him want to vomit, especially now that someone other than himself was seeing how hideous they looked on him. Max didn't take her eyes away from the scars, and even as Will finished wrapping off the bandages on one of his arms, she motioned towards the other one that she wanted to see it, too.

Soon, everything was off. And Max saw his forearms, littered all over

with cuts and scars, a soft look in her eyes. She examined them closely, probably making sure that there was nothing that needed immediate and serious medical attention.

“How recent are these?” she asked, looking up from his arms to him. Will gulped.

“They…they’re all from yesterday,” he admitted, wanting to be fully honest. “I-if you look closely, there might be some faded-away scars, but they’re a lot older…”

Max nodded, biting her lip anxiously. She obviously didn’t like hearing this, especially because there were so many cuts all in one day, but she accepted it. “And that knife…were you planning on doing it again tonight?” she asked.

Sighing, Will nodded. “Right before I heard you knock on my window,” he replied. Her eyes widened in concern. The cuts on his arm from last night alone were pretty extreme…much more and it might have been dangerous. Will had known that, but tonight he hadn’t cared until Max showed up. “B-but Max, please don’t worry about—”

“No, Will, you’re going to let me worry about you. I care for your wellbeing, and I’m going to worry about you because that’s what you need more than anything right now,” she said, perhaps a little forcefully. But Will understood under the circumstances, and for once he felt like he needed someone to worry about him. He had scared himself so much last night. He nodded. “Thank you,” she responded, moving onto her next question. “You, uh, you said that you had older scars. How long have you been doing this, exactly?”

Will knew that his best course of action now would be to answer honestly. “Since I came back from the Upside Down,” he replied. “Two years ago.”

“Okay…and that’s why you did it? Dealing with the trauma and the nightmares and everything?” she asked, confirming. Will couldn’t help but admire her detective skills.

“More or less, y-yeah. That’s how it started.”

“But…how didn’t I know? I stay with you practically once every three nights, and this is the first time I’ve ever seen any hint that you cut.”

“I-it’s because I stopped…” Will said slowly, his voice cracking as he closed his eyes to concentrate. Silent tears rolled down his cheek. “O-or, at least, I thought I did. After everything happened last year and we became friends, you…uh, you helped me a lot,” he admitted, looking at her with teary eyes. Max blinked at him in shock.

“Me? Seriously?” she asked in surprise. “What did I do?”

Now it was Will’s turn to look at Max incredulously for something stupid *she* had said. “Do…you really don’t know?” he asked in disbelief, and she shook her head. Will smiled funnily at her. “Max… you’re incredible. You’re the strongest, most resilient person I’ve ever met. You care so much about the people in your life, even me when I’m a mess, and you’ve helped me so, so much. Even when I wasn’t out to you, it felt like I was because I felt like I could be myself around you and not hide anything about me. Seeing how strong you are makes me stronger as a person, despite my issues.”

Max chuckled nervously, scratching the back of her neck. “Okay, Byers, you can only inflate me ego so much or it’ll burst…” she said uncomfortably.

“I’m serious, Max! You’re great!” he insisted, making her blush as she mumbled a small thank you. “And you’re, uh, also the main reason that I stopped. That’s why you didn’t notice it…because the last time I did it was last March, I think.”

Max lit up. “Really? That’s great!” she said, beaming at him before realizing that there were still cuts on his arm, meaning that the problem had only been gone for a certain period of time. “Um…so, what happened? Last night was the first time since then?”

Will nodded shakily, becoming serious again as he bit his lip. “Yeah…I, uh, I don’t know what happened, I still don’t,” he admitted, sighing. Max looked at him, probably trying to figure out what her next course of action should be. She grabbed his hands comfortingly, noticing that he was shaking again.

“Okay, look, I’ll be honest,” Max said, getting Will’s attention. She smiled. “It feels pretty fucking good to know that I was helping you get through that part of your life, and I’m glad that I was able to help you stop doing this temporarily, even if I didn’t know I did anything. And now that it’s come back and I know about this, I want to help you stop for good.”

Will’s stomach lurched at that, sending his anxiety into overdrive. He knew that he should stop, but now that he started again…he knew that he had just reset a cycle that he had worked hard to overcome. Even after Max entered his life, it took him months to actually stop cutting himself. He wished that he could just wish away those urges like that…although, if everything were that easy, then he’d probably wish away his crush on Mike, his sexuality for convenience’s sake, his trip to the Upside Down, his history with his father…

“It’s…not that simple,” Will said carefully, looking away from her. “I…I can’t just turn off a switch in my head and tell myself to stop. Sometimes it’s impossible to ignore, and I can’t…”

“Shhh, it’s okay, I understand,” Max said, wrapping a single arm around Will. Her kind and understanding side was showing itself for the millionth time that night and Will wondered, yet again, whether she was a literal guardian angel sent to Earth to protect him. “I get it, it won’t be something you’re gonna quit overnight. But I want to help you get there, eventually, so you can stop completely.” Will smiled gratefully. Now that this was out in the open with her, it was so, so nice to be honest with her. He wanted nothing more than to stop. Max smiled back before turning serious again.

“Will, we’re gonna beat this thing, but I need you to think back,” she said, studying him closely. “What was going through your head when you decided to do it again last night? And just now, before I came in?”

Oh. That was going to be painful memory to go back to what exactly he was thinking yesterday, when he was home alone with his depressed, self-loathing thoughts. But he knew that it was necessary, and he had already told Max so much that he couldn’t not at least try to think back and tell her this. So, he thought back to what exactly he was doing yesterday…and that’s when he remembered: he had just

finished talking with Mike. That's when the tears began to come back.

As Max's arm squeezed a little tighter around him, Will whimpered. "It…it was Mike," he admitted, his voice cracking through the tears. "Yesterday we had a fight during lunch over—" he sniffled. It was over her, but Will didn't exactly want to say it like that. Maybe there was another way he could rephrase it so Max wouldn't feel guilty, which was the last thing he wanted. "He wanted you kicked out of the Party for what happened with Lucas, and I told him that I didn't want that. I-it got, uh, heated…" he trailed off. "I said…I called you…I said you were my best friend, to his face. And he was upset about that."

"Why would he be? We *are* best friends."

Will nodded, wiping away some of his tears. "Y-yeah, but he didn't know that. In his mind, me and him were still best friends…"

"But you can have more than one best friend, right?" Max asked. Will was surprised at just how similar their train of thoughts were on this matter.

"That's what I told him! But he didn't really seem to buy it," he said sadly, sniffling. "And ever since, even today, he's been acting… distant. I-it made me realize, I guess, that we've been drifting apart for a while…ever since he and El were able to start dating openly. She, uh, she told me that you told her yesterday that you're gay…and that's great!" he added quickly, hoping that he didn't come across as petty or jealous towards her and El's relationship. "But, um…it also made me realize that me and Mike don't have that type of trust anymore…I don't think I could ever do the same thing, and I used to talk to him about almost everything." He took a deep breath. "That made me sad, and anxious, and stressed…and when I feel all of those things at once, it makes me…the urge to do it gets stronger," he finished, gulping nervously.

Honestly, Will hadn't really connected much of those dots before he had said it out loud. But once he said it, it was obvious. He had relapsed because of Mike. That sweet, wonderful boy who had constellations on his face, whom he loved to draw for hours upon

end. Mike, the one who risked everything to try to find him and never believed he was dead. The one who stuck by his side nearly the entire time the Mind Flayer attempted to take over his body. His close, close friend who was quickly becoming a stranger who wanted nothing to do with him. That thought alone made Will already want to—

"So, it's because you two are drifting apart? That's what made you do it again?" Max asked for confirmation. Will hesitantly nodded.

"I…I'm afraid that I'm going to lose him, for good," Will said, shuttering. "I know I can't have him the way I, uh, want him…" he didn't think he needed to elaborate. He knew that there was no way Mike would ever feel the same way about him, ever. "But I'm not sure I can handle not at least having him as a friend."

Max sighed. Will knew that she was the least close with Mike out of anyone in their group. She might not even like Mike, given how he was dating El. And to be fair, he *had* been pretty rude to her, especially considering what had happened just the other day. Regardless, he felt like he was being torn between the two of them, neither Mike nor Max necessarily needing him in their lives, yet Will needing both of them in his life desperately.

"Look, Will, I'm not gonna lie. Mike can be kind of a dick," she admitted, pausing before continuing. "But…I also know how much he means to you. And I know that he risked a lot to get you back, both when you were missing and with the stuff with the Mind Flayer. He wouldn't have done all of that if he didn't care for you. I knew that you guys had a really close bond the minute he dragged you away from trick-or-treating during one of the first times we met, just so he could make sure you were okay. I don't think he would give up on your friendship as easily as you think he would."

Will was still uncertain. *Very* uncertain. "I…I'm just not sure if he trusts me like he used to anymore…" he said, sighing. "And I'm not sure how to get that trust back."

Max pursed her lips, and it looked to Will that she was deep in thought. After a long pause between them, she spoke, slowly. "I think I have an idea…" she said, looking at Will uncertainly. "Yesterday,

when I told Jane that I liked girls, I did it because I wanted to be honest with her, but more than that, wanted her to trust me. And I think after I told her that, she understood how much of a secret it was to me and she trusted me even more, even though I didn't tell her everything. If I had been evasive about the real reason I broke up with Lucas, then I think she might have trusted me a little less. That's why I told her."

Will nodded, following her words slowly. But as he began to place together what she was saying in his head, his eyes widened in fear. "Max, I couldn't tell him that I'm…El didn't grow up in Hawkins, there was no way she would have judged you—"

"I know, I know, I'm not saying that the two situations are similar. And I'm not saying you should tell him exactly that, either…" she said, sighing. Will furrowed his brow in confusion.

"…so, what are you saying?"

"All I'm saying is that you need to tell him something personal about you, and I think I have an idea," she said, pausing for a long time as she struggled to find the words for what she was about to say. "Look, I know you're not going to like this, but don't say no right away okay? So, here's what I'm thinking…"

Max had been right: Will *didn't* like her idea. Or at least, he hadn't. After she had tried her best to try to convince him that entire night that this could be one of the very few ways that he could restore his relationship with Mike, but he still hadn't bought it completely. She had, however, walked Will away from a "no" to an "I'll think about," which was better than nothing, right?

She had agreed not to tell Joyce, Jonathan, or anyone else about what Will had shared with her that night. Although, if she was honest, what Will had told her did scare her, a lot. She still didn't like this. No, Max didn't like this one bit. She was still hurt that Will

hadn't told her immediately, and she hated that he thought the solution to get rid of his stress was to hurt himself. But she did feel a tiny bit better after he had been honest with her.

Obviously, Will's fears about her abandoning him or feeling uncomfortable around him were unfounded; but Max still cared deeply about him and his safety. And the idea that he was hurting himself, and sometimes couldn't stop himself from doing it, deeply worried her. She knew that getting through this with him would be a process, but she hoped that she had assured him that she would be there 100% of the way with him.

One week had passed, and Will had gotten better…somewhat. At the very least, he wasn't a walking corpse coming into school. And he was talking openly about his self-harm with her, although that was mainly out of Max's insistence. Thankfully, she had been able to talk him down from doing it for a while. The cuts he had made that first time were pretty severe, and she told him that if he tried to do much more, then it might be very dangerous for him. Will had agreed.

In some ways, Max thought that she was helping. She was pretty optimistic that Will knew that he now had a shoulder to lean on regarding this (even though she was still a little upset that he didn't seem to already know that…they had both told each other some of their deepest, most well-kept secrets, after all). And she was glad that Will was now telling her about the urges he was having, at least. But that was kind of the problem…that he was still having those urges. It was another reminder that she could only help so much: the root of the problem, the source of most of this stress and anxiety which caused him to do it, was still Mike.

At lunch, Max stuck closely by Will's side, and Mike barely acknowledged either of them. A week later, Mike had said maybe three whole sentences to Will, at least while Max was present. And Will had told her that it hadn't gotten better. Mike obviously didn't talk to her as well…there was still some tension at the table, despite her making peace with Lucas. But Lucas, despite acting a little awkward with her, was fine around her. Dustin was still his goofy self. Jane was nice to her and everyone else in their group in general. It was Mike who was the source of that tension. Although, at the end of the day, she wasn't surprised. Mike didn't really like her from the

beginning. But, at that moment, she didn't really care much about his opinion of her. She really only cared about Will's wellbeing…which, of course, could be traced back to Mike.

It was midway through the next week when it happened again. Max had taken a ride to school with Billy (*ugh*), and as soon as she could she got out and ran out of the car. She had tried to spend almost every night of the past week with Will, in order to keep an eye on him and make sure that he couldn't do it again. But Neil was getting more restrictive on letting her go out, so she had to stay some nights back at home…whenever they were able to wrangle their hands on her. Last night had been one of those nights.

She quickly found Will by the bike rack, looking disheveled and wearing a sick expression on his face. It was similar to how he looked the day after he had hurt himself last week, and Max felt a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach. Will wasn't even trying to hide the fact that something was wrong around her as he smiled weakly at her.

"Did it happen again?" Max asked quietly. Will's barely-present smile quickly faded away and he nodded. His eyes were red and bloodshot. God, he looked so tired. He probably had barely slept again last night.

"I-it was only a few…" he whispered, looking down at the ground shamefully. "It wasn't as bad as last time…I-I'm s-sorry."

"It's—" Max was literally about to say that it was okay. Which it most certainly was not. Nothing about this was okay. Sighing, she wrapped her arms around Will gently, careful not to hurt his probably-tender arms. "It's like we said, this is all still a work in progress…thank you for telling me."

Will nodded into her before pulling away. They likely would have stayed like that for longer if they weren't at school, but they didn't want to give any gossiping passerby the wrong idea.

"I want to go with your plan," he said abruptly, taking Max completely off guard. "I…I want to tell Mike. Today."

Max gawked. “About…about…okay,” she said, a grin on her face. At last, he had managed to come around. She knew it would take some time, but she was still thankful that he had agreed to her plan. “Good. You really won’t regret it, Will. Did you, uh, want me to be with you when you do it, or…?”

“I think I can do it alone,” he said, sighing shakily as he put his hands in his pockets. Max knew that they were probably shaking like hell in there. That was something he did when he was nervous, she knew that much. “It’s…it’s probably best if I do it alone.”

Max nodded understandingly. “Okay, sounds good…when were you planning on doing it? I can pull Jane aside so you and Mike can be alone,” she said.

Will glanced around nervously at the other students who were making their way towards the building. “U-umm, sooner rather than later…maybe, at lunch?” he suggested. “Just…keep El preoccupied during then.”

Again, Max nodded as the two of them walked towards the school. Keeping Jane preoccupied? She could certainly do that. “Uhh, so how are you feeling about this?” she asked carefully.

Will sighed, keeping his eyes away from her. “Honestly? Scared. Like, really fucking scared,” he admitted quietly. “I mean, if anything I’m worried that this will only drive a wedge between us. He’ll see me as more of a freak and stop talking to me even more than he already is.”

“That’s *not* going to happen, I guarantee it,” she insisted, looking over at him. “Remember, you guys have already been through hell and back. He’s supported you before, and there’s no *way* he wouldn’t support you now if he realizes you need it. And don’t give me that look, Byers. You definitely do,” she added, giving him a stern look as he looked unsure of himself for a split second. She knew how hard it could be for him to ask for help from others. That’s why this was so important for him to do, though.

“You’re probably right,” he said, walking into the school with her. “Just…promise you’ll still be there for me if things go badly?”

Max crossed her arms. “Dude. That shouldn’t even have to be a question. Yes, I fucking promise. Even when things don’t go badly, because they won’t, I’ll still be there for you,” she said, rolling her eyes as Will smiled slightly. And Max thought that *she* could be insecure at times…

As their brief conversation went on, Will was able to tell her that he was going to leave a note in Mike’s locker, telling him to meet him by the football field. Very few people would be out there, so that made sense. Max’s only job, then, was to make sure Jane didn’t follow Mike once he found that note. Then, everything would go well…or, at least, she hoped that everything would go well. Despite acting confidently around Will, she wasn’t entirely sure that her plan would work either. She didn’t know Mike like Will knew Mike. From what Lucas had told her, however, she knew that Mike was fiercely protective of the small boy, more so than any of his other friends (save perhaps Jane, for obvious reasons). So, she had a pretty good feeling about this. Regardless…as she and Will walked their separate ways towards their classes, she couldn’t help but be nervous for his sake.

As soon as the lunch bell rang, Max sprinted across the hallway, scouring them for Jane. Today was a Thursday, and she knew that before Lunch on a Thursday Jane had English, so she would probably be around the South side of the high school building…wait, how did she know that much about her schedule? Grr, stupid question. Of course she obsessed about her schedule, just like she obsessed over everything about her. Secretly. Her train of thought was interrupted as she saw a bob of curly hair walk out of the English classroom.

“Jane!” Max called out to her, running over to her. She was a little bit out of breath, which made Jane look at her curiously as she cocked her head to the side.

“Are you alright?” she asked, her brow furrowed. This made Max’s face flush even more.

“Huff…yeah…” Max said, still breathing heavily as she hunched over for a moment before standing up straight, puffing out her chest. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Why did you run over here?” Jane asked quizzically.

“What, a friend can’t greet another friend coming out of class for lunch?” Max asked jokingly. She was met by a blank stare from Jane. She sighed. “Well, I just wanted to let you know that Mike won’t be at lunch today. He and Will have to talk about something.”

Jane’s face fell, and she looked very disappointed. Max couldn’t help but feel a little disappointed at her disappointment as well. The S.S. Mike and Eleven was still going strong…goddammit, why did she think that was a bad thing? Mike made Jane happy. Shouldn’t that be what Max wanted too? But noooo, dumb stupid idiot bad friend Max wanted Jane *all* to herself. It wasn’t enough that Jane accepted her for who she was, but then again nothing was enough for her, because she was a dumb, ungrateful piece of gar—

“What are Mike and Will doing?” Jane asked, snapping Max out of her self-beratement. Max took a moment to try to come up with an answer that would both satisfy her and keep her away from what they were going to be talking about.

“Will has something very important to tell Mike…” she said slowly, looking at Jane carefully as they stood outside of the classroom. “It’s a secret.”

“Oh,” Jane said, her brow becoming relaxed again as she looked at Max. “Is it like the secret you told me last week?” Max’s eyes widened. “That you like gi—” before she could finish, Max clamped her hand over her mouth, taking her by surprise. Max was surprised that she actually did that, and half-surprised that Jane hadn’t instinctively thrown her across the hallway with her powers. Although what was really flustering Max now was that she still had her hands covering Jane’s lips, and the two were mere inches apart.

“N-not out loud!” Max whispered, pulling away from her abruptly and glancing around them. Thankfully, they were still alone. “It’s a secret, remember? I don’t want anyone to overhear!”

Jane blushed in embarrassment, and any panic that Max felt immediately washed away due to how absolutely cute she was. “Sorry…” she said quietly, looking down at her feet then back at

Max. “Well? Is it? Does he like…boys?” she added in a whisper.

Max sighed. “No, but it’s something really important. I can’t tell you, I’m sorry,” she said apologetically. Although she *did* find it interesting that she had been able to guess that Will could potentially be gay, even when Max hadn’t figured it out until he told her. She knew that Jane probably wouldn’t care, but that wasn’t her secret to tell. And Max wasn’t lying to Jane, because Will *wasn’t* going to be telling Mike about that, so it was kind of a win-win for her.

“It’s okay, I understand…everyone has their secrets,” she said, putting her hands in her pockets as she walked with Max down the hall. Max raised an eyebrow. What the hell was that supposed to mean? Before she could pry further, Jane had already moved on. “So, it’s just us at lunch I guess?” she asked, although it came across as more of a statement.

Max looked at her, confused. “What do you mean? Lucas and Dustin are still gonna be with us.”

Jane shook her head. “Nope. They got in trouble yesterday. Pranked the Spanish teacher. Lunch detention,” she said matter-of-factly, giving Max a small smile. It nearly gave Max a heart attack. “Just us,” she repeated shyly.

Okay, okay, play it cool, Mayfield. She shrugged nonchalantly. “Okay. Cool,” she said casually as the two girls walked into the lunchroom. Her mind was thinking anything but casual thoughts at the moment, however.

Although as the two of them sat together at their empty lunch table, her mind traced back to Will. Max just hoped that he would be able to do what he needed to do…and she also hoped that Mike wouldn’t be a dick about everything.

Will was sitting on a bench outside by the football field, his jacket

wrapped tightly around his body as he put his hands in his pockets, waiting for Mike. The winter air was chilly, even with his multiple layers of long sleeves. Although he was probably just fidgeting because he was so fucking nervous. Will had put the note asking to meet with him during lunch in Mike's locker after he had seen Max earlier that morning, and now he was waiting for Mike to come. It had only been about five minutes, but it had felt like an hour. Will wasn't sure what would be better for him: if Mike hadn't found the note or ignored it and didn't come, or if he saw the note and he did come.

He wasn't sure what had eventually turned him around on Max's plan. After all, initially it had sounded completely crazy. But last night, after he relapsed again, he was left there with a knife in his hands and so, so scared. He almost wanted to tell his Mom, or Jonathan, but both of them were out working. By the time they had gotten home, that feeling had passed. Maybe one day, he could work up the courage to tell them not only about his history with self-harm, but about everything else as well. Today would not be that day, but he knew that he needed to try to make a step in the right direction away from all of this. And Max's plan was the closest step towards a solution that he could possibly see…even if it might end in catastrophe.

Although, as he saw Mike's figure walking towards him from the school building, Will had to suppress the urge to get up and flee. He knew that he couldn't. Mike had already spotted him after all, and he was quickly making his way towards him.

"Hey," Mike said, concern etched on his face. Will tried to smile in response, although it came out forced. "Your note said it was urgent…is everything okay?" he asked standing in front of him. Will quickly made a move to nod, but, thinking better of himself, it slowly morphed into a shake of the head. Nothing was okay about this, and Mike needed to know that.

Mike sat down next to Will on the bench, rubbing his hands together for a little warmth. They sat in silence for a little while as Mike waited for him to say something…but nothing came out. He didn't know where he could possibly begin. Whereas Max had already known what was up as soon as she had seen the knife, Mike knew

nothing.

Mike sighed. “Will…you remember last Fall, when I told you that if you thought you were going crazy, then we could go crazy together?” he asked. Will looked over at him and nodded slowly. “You’d…you’d tell me if something was going on, right? With the Upside Down?”

Will’s eyes widened. “Mike, this isn’t about that,” he said quickly. “The nightmares I have right now about it are just regular nightmares, at this point I could tell if they were something else. And I would have told you.”

Mike nodded, frowning. “Okay…well, when I said we could go crazy together, I didn’t mean that it had to be limited to supernatural stuff,” he said gently, reaching out to grab Will’s shoulder. He nearly flinched. “Will, I know something’s up. You’ve been acting weird for weeks now. Whatever’s going on…we’re still friends, right? You can tell me anything.”

Will knew that this wasn’t true; he couldn’t tell Mike everything. He couldn’t tell him that he loved him, and that he had loved him for years. He couldn’t tell him that he was gay…he just couldn’t. At least not right now. But now that he was there, he couldn’t back down. Will knew he had to tell him about his self-harm. He was the one who had asked him to come here, and if he didn’t tell him anything then Mike might never really trust him ever again. He could tell Max. He now needed to tell Mike.

“I hurt myself last night,” Will muttered quietly. His eyes were glued to his knees, refusing to look at Mike as he pulled his shoulder away.

“What do you mean?” he asked, the confusion obvious in his voice. “Did you fall or something?”

Will shook his head, his lip quivering. “I mean…I hurt myself, i-intentionally. I…” he tried to contain his emotions, but it was all suddenly too much for him. He burst into tears. He had made the wrong choice. Even after all of the progress he had made with Max, he still couldn’t say that he cut himself. With Mike, this was all too much. He shouldn’t have brought him out here.

“Will…” Will felt an arm wrap around his shoulder. Teary-eyed, he looked up to see Mike looking at him with a very concerned look on his face. “I still don’t understand…I can’t help you if you don’t tell me what’s going on. Please, talk to me.”

Will sniffed, his hand acting like a windshield wiper trying to wipe away the scared tears from his eyes. He sighed, trying to concentrate on just getting the words out of his mouth. “I cut myself last night!” he blurted out, his mouth opening and closing quickly. Mike stared at him with a startled expression.

“What do you mean?” Mike asked again, although this time there was a hint of panic in his voice. When Will didn’t respond immediately, he grabbed his other soldier and turned the boy to face him. “Will! What do you mean?” he demanded with a newfound intensity, making Will flinch. “Why would you do something like that?”

It was exactly as he had feared: Mike was angry at him. He saw him as a freak now for sure, and that was even without knowing that he was gay. He was going to abandon him, kick him out of the friend group. He’d tell Lucas, Dustin, and El about how much a freak he was, and they’d all abandon him. Maybe if he was lucky Max would stay by his side…

“I’m sorry…Will, you still there?” Mike asked, the intensity in his voice gone. Will blinked back into existence. Mike sighed. “I’m sorry. I’m not angry at you. Just…please, tell me what’s happening with you. You…*cut* yourself?” he asked carefully.

Maybe this was still salvageable. Will couldn’t afford to space out anymore. He needed to be present. Slowly, he nodded. “I…I’ve been doing it for a while…since I got back from the Upside Down…” he paused, but quickly continued talking once he saw Mike’s eyes widen in alarm. “B-but I stopped for a while! I hadn’t done it in months… until I started again last week. And then last night.”

“But why?” Mike asked, his voice desperate, almost pleading for Will to give him answers. “Why would you deliberately hurt yourself? It doesn’t…I don’t get it.”

Will sighed. “I-it’s complicated…I originally did it to just deal with

everything I went through…the feeling of everybody watching over me, and when I felt like I was going crazy with my visions and everything, it was too much, and that was my way to cope. It, uh, made me release a lot of those emotions, in a weird way. But after the Mind Flayer, I mostly stopped…" he explained slowly. "And… then I did it again last week, and last night, and…I still feel the urge to do it, and I'm really, really scared…" Will admitted, trailing off as his voice cracked. Mike brought Will closer to him until he realized that he was being wrapped up in a hug.

"It's okay…I'm sorry I raised my voice earlier, I'm not mad at you… just angry at myself for not noticing it sooner, honestly," Mike said as Will hugged Mike back, his chin resting on his shoulder. Will frowned. He honestly wouldn't have blamed Mike if he was made at him; Will had been pretty angry at himself ever since the relapse. *He* was the one who was hurting himself. What was Mike angry at himself for?

"Mike, you didn't do anything…it's my fault, not yours," Will said, sniffling a little as he pulled away. "I'm sorry for not telling you earlier."

Mike bit his lip. "I…like you said, you were scared. I understand," he said, although Will could tell that he was still a little hurt that he didn't tell him. "I still don't really understand why you would do this, especially now…isn't the Mind Flayer gone? Why did you suddenly start doing it again?"

Will took in a deep breath. He didn't really know how to word this… so maybe it would be best to just speak what he was feeling. "It's…I started originally because I was feeling overwhelmed…and I'm feeling overwhelmed again because I—" Will immediately stopped talking, freezing up. He just realized that he was about to tell Mike *everything*. And he still couldn't do that yet. He had to censor himself. "I-I'm afraid of losing you as a friend."

Mike sighed, and Will noticed that he didn't look too surprised. Just regretful. "I get what you mean," he admitted, confirming Will's fears. "I…I guess you're referring to the fight we had last week?"

Will nodded. "Yeah…but it wasn't just that. I feel like we've just been

drifting apart recently…and a lot of that is my own fault," he said. After all, when you try to hide three (now only two) major secrets from someone who is supposed to be your best friend, it's kind of hard to remain as close as you once were.

"No, Will, it's my fault," Mike said quickly, taking Will by surprise. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have gotten angry at you then, and I shouldn't have been distant with you either. I could tell you were hurting the day afterwards when we were both late to class, but I…I'm not sure how to say this without sounding weird," he admitted, and Will noticed that he looked a little embarrassed. Mike's face was a little flushed. "I…when you said Max was your best friend, I guess I was… jealous?"

Will's jaw nearly dropped to the ground. There was no way that he could have heard that right. "J-jealous?" he asked in disbelief.

Mike pursed his lips. "M-maybe that's too strong of a word," he said. "What I meant was, when you said that, I just felt irrationally angry because I thought I was supposed to be your best friend, and seeing you being so close with someone else made me…shit, I guess jealous is a pretty good word for it," he cursed, chuckling nervously. Despite himself, Will couldn't help but smile. Mike was jealous, *jealous*, for *his* sake. For a half-second, Will thought that maybe Mike had seen Max as "competition" in a more-than-friends way, but then he had to mentally pinch himself to remind himself that Mike was still very much in love with El.

"Mike, there's no reason to feel, uh, jealous," Will said, the word itself suddenly sounding pretty funny to him. "Max is a really good friend, and I think she's one of my best friends. But…I meant what I said back then, y'know? I'm allowed to have more than one best friend. And I still want you as my best friend…I mean, if you wanted to still have me as a best friend," he added quickly, not wanting to presume anything. It had been a long week for both of them, he knew, and they had barely talked at all.

"I do!" Mike replied just as quickly. "I really do. I told you that asking you to be my friend was the best thing I ever did, remember? You can't get rid of me that easily," he joked, a more confident grin on his face. "Even if I have to share the title with Max, there's

nothing more that I'd want than to be your best friend. I mean it."

Will smiled shyly at him, hoping that he wasn't blushing as hard as he thought he was at that point. "Thanks. I think if you and Max gave each other a chance, you'd actually get along really well. She's pretty cool."

"Fair enough," Mike conceded, growing a bit more serious. "I'm sorry for acting stupid earlier."

"I forgive you…I'm sorry for acting distant and, uh, y'know, not telling you about what was going on with me," Will said nervously as the topic of self-harm bubbled up to the surface once again. He didn't need to elaborate; Mike already knew what he was talking about by the drastic change in demeanor.

"So…does that mean you're gonna stop, uh, cutting?" Mike asked. Saying it out loud made Will uneasy, but there was no way Mike would know that. And he only wished that it could be that simple.

"I really want to…I just don't know yet. I can't control when I get those urges to do it. Even after everything with the Mind Flayer, it took me months to stop…" he said quietly. Mike looked disappointed. "But…I feel a lot better now after this. So…I think I'll be able to stop soon?"

Mike smiled again. It was the gentle, caring type of smile that Will adored from him. "Good," he said, grabbing onto Will's hand. Oh, Will was almost certainly blushing hard by this point. "That's about as good as I can hope for. And, uh, can you just promise me something?" he asked tentatively. Will, ignoring his inflamed cheeks, nodded. "Whenever you feel like you're going to do it again, just…if no one else is with you, like Max or anyone, just call me, okay? Either over the Supercom or the phone. I promise, I'll pick up every time. Just please, please talk to me before you do it. I might not understand why you do it fully, but I want to help."

Will smiled gratefully. "I promise," he said, "I'd like you to help." Mike grinned, and Will knew that his Mike, his wonderful, perfect Mike, was back. The amount of relief that he felt at that thought was insurmountable. As Mike hugged him again, the intrusive thoughts

resurfaced in the back of his mind: that Mike still didn't know that he was gay, or that he had a crush on him. And that would most certainly weigh on him in the future, Will was sure of it. But for now, with Mike back by his side, Will knew that he was on the road to recovery. Because for the first time all week, he no longer felt the urge to hurt himself.

Notes for the Chapter:

Okay, this chapter was certainly a whirlwind of emotions for me to write! I hope you all liked that uplifting ending after the last couple of chapters. I wanted to write more Mike/Will action, and this chapter will open the door for more interaction between the two like you see with Max and Jane.

This chapter, and the last chapter, have dealt with a lot of heavy themes, and I think it is important for me to note that I have never personally self-harmed in the way that Will describes. Much of this chapter, specifically the conversations with Max and Mike, were loosely inspired by similar conversations I had with very close friends who had self-harmed where I was in Max/Mike's positions. So in a way, writing this chapter hit really close to home for me. I really tried to portray what Will is feeling with regards to self-harm as accurately as I possibly can, and I am really sorry if anyone who has experienced this feels that I misrepresented this mental illness in any way. Whenever I depict heavy topics such as these (self-harm, depression, suicide, etc), I try my utmost to portray them in a respectful and serious light, and I hope that that comes across in my writing.

All of that being said, that about wraps up this arc regarding Will's self-harm for much of the story. There will be mentions to it every now and then and I may bring it up again later, but there are so many more places that I want to go with this story. Max and Will's tale is going to take a lighter tone for the next couple of chapters, and hopefully I'll get to

write more fluff for you guys. I think I need to for my own mental well-being :P

Anyway, thank you so much for reading! I really want to thank everyone who has commented or left kudos, the reception to this story is more than I could have ever hoped for! I'm not sure when the next chapter will get up, but just know that I am constantly working on it! If you leave comments, then chances are it will motivate me more to continue writing :)

Until next time!

6. Escape to New York

The next day, Will arrived to school with Mike. In an effort to mend their friendship and make Will feel better, he had invited him over for a sleepover. And he really, really did feel better. For the first night in over a week, he didn't feel the urge to cut even once. Max had definitely helped steady him multiple times throughout the past week…but it put him at ease to know that Mike was accepting of this small, little part of him. They spent some of the night playing video games in his cozy basement, a place where Will almost always felt comfortable, but most of the time was spent by them both talking. Will surprised himself by being able to open up a bit more about his self-harm around Mike…someone he was used to being so guarded around that over the past year it had become almost second nature to him to lie. But that feeling of relief, honesty, and acceptance…even if he still wasn't able to tell him everything, it still felt so damn *good*.

Mike talked, too. Nothing too deep and personal, but just how he had missed having him around. It was a small thought, but Will couldn't help but marvel at the fact that *Mike* missed having *him* around. He really had no idea. Of course, after everything Will had told him, some of his more protective traits had kicked in immediately afterwards; namely, asking Will if he was okay over and over again, keeping a worried eye over him at all times, and a few other various things. But while that might have bothered Will a year ago, now he was just thankful that Mike was paying attention to him. Part of him even found it pretty endearing and cute…although the list of things he thought Mike was cute for was long enough to fill a Spanish-English dictionary.

Will wasn't expecting to reconcile with Mike so quickly after barely even acknowledging each other for a week. That surprised him. But the biggest surprise came when Max sprinted up to Will outside of the school that morning.

"Dude!" Will felt a hand on his shoulder, and he turned around to see Max with a large grin on her face. Mike was talking with Lucas and Dustin a little way away from them by the bike rack. "What happened???"

Will smiled shyly at her. They hadn't really gotten the chance to talk about this since yesterday morning, when he told her that he was going to talk with Mike. So, she technically still didn't know, although judging from her reaction it looked like she knew that it had been a positive result. "I'll tell you everything later…but, it went well," he said, smiling as he glanced back over at his friends. "Really well."

"Tooold you," Max said in a sing-song voice, punching him gently in the upper harm. "I already knew it went well anyway, though. When I went to your house your Mom said that you were having a sleepover at Mike's. So I could only assume that if you were sleeping with him last night that things went well," she added jokingly, giving him a sly look. Will blushed furiously, looking around again to make sure nobody heard her.

"Don't say it like that!" Will hissed at her, embarrassed as Max snickered at him. If there was one thing she knew how to do, it was to get under his skin. "But, uh, yeah, things went well…really well. You were right," he said, the smile returning to his lips.

"Of course I was right! I'm always right!" Max said boastfully, teasing him. Will smirked.

"Oh, and by the way, thank you for pulling El away during lunch. It was probably extra hard to keep her away because Dustin and Lucas were in detention," Will said, hastily trying to come up with something quick to get under her skin, "…although, I have a feeling that you didn't mind being alone with her for a lunch date," he teased quietly, making sure none of the others heard him but Max. Max certainly did hear him, and nearly hit him in the arm again as she pouted.

"Max." Both Max and Will abruptly stopped talking about the subject as Mike came up to them. Will knew that he couldn't have heard them, but he was still taken off guard by Mike even acknowledging Max's presence. Will had talked to him a bit more about the nature of their friendship, and how important she was to him, but it still surprised him when Mike looked over at the startled red-haired girl and said, "I'm sorry."

Max and Will blinked in shock. “Uh, what?” Max asked, bewildered.

“I said I’m sorry…” Mike repeated, looking at her awkwardly. “I guess…we’ve never been on the best of terms, and I think I’m the one who’s mainly to blame for that. So, I’m sorry. I know how much El likes you, and I also know that you help Will with his, uh, problem,” he said, glancing over at him. All three of them knew what he was talking about, and Will was thankful that he didn’t elaborate with all of the other people around. “What I’m trying to say is, I want to put everything behind us if you’re willing. So…friends?” he asked, awkwardly sticking out his hand.

It took Max a moment to actually respond, probably because she was still a little stunned that Mike would apologize to her at all. Not even Will had expected that. But slowly, a rueful smile appeared on her lips, and she stuck out her hand and shook Mike’s. “Apology accepted. Friends,” she reaffirmed.

Mike breathed a sigh of relief as he shook her hand. “Right. Uh, cool. Thanks,” he said, smiling thankfully. He looked like he was about to say something else, but he was interrupted when a figure from behind ran into him and nearly tackled him onto the ground. Mike was barely able to keep standing as a thin pair of arms wrapped themselves around his waist. It took Will only a moment to realize who it was: El.

“Miiike! I missed you!” Eleven cooed, getting on her tip-toes to rest her chin on his shoulder from behind. Mike was growing faster than any of them, and he was really tall at this point. Once Mike recognized that his girlfriend was the one who nearly gave him a heart attack, he laughed, reaching an arm around his back to poke her in the side.

“I, uh, missed you too, El!” he said, laughing with a big grin on his face. Wait, hadn’t they only seen each other yesterday? As El untangled her arms from his back, Mike turned around and hugged her torso, pulling her small body up a couple inches in the air, making her giggle.

Will and Max exchanged glances with each other. To the outside world, it probably would have been an endearing look in regards to

the couple; an unspoken “ugh, can you believe how cute these two are?” For their situations, though…that look they gave each other meant something very different. Thankfully, they were so used to pretending and pushing down their feelings that no one other than themselves would have picked up on it.

“Okay guys, enough PDA! Mike, unlatch yourself from the lady’s body!” Dustin demanded sassily, walking up towards them as El gave Mike a quick peck on the cheek. Will smiled thankfully to himself. He wouldn’t have wanted to be the one to break them apart…he had only just gotten back on Mike’s good side, after all.

“Yeah, yeah, whatever,” Mike grumbled as he let go of his girlfriend. Will glanced at Max, and she seemed a little relieved as well. As it turned out, Mike wasn’t the only one of them who had been jealous: there was a lot of jealousy that was circulating in their group. No one else could know about his jealousy for El, though, and he suspected that Max didn’t want her jealousy for Mike leaking to anyone else as well. They had both long learned to hide their feelings…even from themselves.

Max and Will discreetly shared a sad smile with one another as they walked a little bit behind the group, with Mike and El giggling and whispering in each other's ears while they walked inside the school, obviously enamored in the other’s mere existence. Will always felt wrong for feeling jealous for them, and he knew that Max probably felt similarly…but he had figured out long ago that he couldn’t really control how his feelings. The most he could do was get by day by day, knowing that at least she would always understand.

And besides, things were getting better. Mike could now help him in some ways, too. Maybe he would get over his crush over time. Time heals all wounds, as they say. Hopefully that was true for them.

Five months later, Will had figured out that time didn’t heal all wounds. Although that didn’t mean that things didn’t get better.

For one, the last time he had cut had been in early February, two months after Max and Mike had found out about it. He had tried his best to remain true to his promise with Mike, and nearly every time he felt those feelings swell up inside him again he called him and talked them through (to the best of his abilities…because, of course, Mike still couldn't know *everything*). Max had also been staying at the Byers' home even more frequently, significantly affording him less time alone for when he would be able to do it. But, perhaps for the most important reason at all, Will stopped because he didn't feel the need to anymore. He knew he had people he could rely on now, and that in and of itself was an incredibly empowering feeling. The memories of course still haunted him…but he was getting better each day. And he rarely felt the urge to cut at all anymore.

By April, Mike and Will's friendship had been fully restored; in some ways, they were closer than ever. It had helped that Mike had made amends with Max so quickly after he had found out about how much she had helped with his problem, and so there was no more animosity or awkwardness among them anymore. Max had even admitted that she liked hanging out with Mike a lot more after he apologized to her. *Max*, enjoying spending time with *Mike*. Will didn't know what was more believable: that Max actually liked hanging out with Mike, or that Mike had secretly told him that he felt the same way. Wait, no, it was definitely the latter. Will had certainly not expected *that*.

What's more, the tension that had lingered between Max and Lucas since the breakup had died down to the point where it was no longer an issue. According to Max, they still hadn't really talked if they had moved past the "more than not friends" stage yet…but they were at least friendly with each other. With the lack of hurt feelings and rivalries in the Party, all six of them had been getting along really well. And so that was all good news.

The bad news was, of course, Will's crush on Mike hadn't gone away. Not even close. And Max had told him that her crush on El was still very much present as well.

But outside of that, things were getting better for Will. For all of them. Will's life stayed hovering around pretty good until late April of 1986.

The school day had ended like any other. Max and Will were, as usual, walking towards the bike rack after saying goodbye to the rest of their friends. At this point, Will usually assumed that Max was staying over at his house unless she said otherwise. Her house had become increasingly more and more toxic, and he knew exactly what it was like living in a household full of abuse. Jonathan and his mother did too, so in their minds she could never overstay her welcome. Will sometimes just wished that her stepfather wasn't so insistent on bringing her home sometimes so she could stay with them permanently.

As the two of them approached the bike rack and Max began to pick up her skateboard, she gasped suddenly, dropping the board on the ground as she stared off in the distance, her mouth agape and her eyes bugging out. Will's eyes filled with concern.

"Max? Max!" Will said worriedly, trying to get her attention. It was almost as if a bolt of lightning had hit and paralyzed her. "What's wrong???" he asked urgently, his pulse quickening in fear. Slowly, Max turned her head over towards him, and to his surprise, he saw the edges of a large, goofy smile on the ends of her mouth.

"Byers. Ho. Lee. Shit," she said slowly. Will only furrowed his brow, looking at her with complete bafflement.

"Um, Max, I'm usually pretty good at decoding whatever you try to tell me in whatever weird language you speak, but you're going to have to give me more than that," he said uncertainly. Max, still maintaining that same crazed expression from before, slapped him on the arm. "Ow!"

"Byers. I can't believe I forgot to tell you!" she exclaimed, the grin on her face becoming wider. "The biggest fucking thing in the entire motherfucking world just happened! I…hold on, one minute," Max said as she kneeled down and opened up her backpack. Will watched with curiosity, and a little bit of worry, as she rummaged through her backpack quickly and eventually pulled out a small, plastic card. Max handed it to Will, who inspected it closely.

It took Will a moment to realize what he was looking at…but his eyes widened as he saw what it was. The card had Max's picture on it,

various information about herself, and at the top it said "Indiana Learner's Permit."

"Holy shit, Max!" Will said, gaping at her as Max snatched it back with a proud grin on her face. He reached up to her and hugger her excitedly, causing the two of them to laugh as they jumped up into the air. "You can drive! You can actually drive!"

"*Well*, only with an adult. I still can't get an official license for another year and a half," she said as a caveat as she pulled away from him with a shy smile. "But, still…it's pretty fucking cool." In the State of Indiana, you could get a Learner's Permit when you were fifteen, but you were not allowed to have a driver's license until you were sixteen and-a-half. Will knew this because, after she had gotten a taste of driving a car during that night back in November of 1984, she had always loved talking about when she could legally drive. After her fifteenth birthday last week, Will had expected to hear her talk about eventually getting her permit. But he never expected her to want to take the test and pass it so soon.

"Yeah! Really fucking cool," Will affirmed, beaming at Max. "You're the only one of us who can drive now!"

"…with an adult. But, yeah," Max said sheepishly. "Now I just need to play the waiting game and find someone to drive with me over the summer. I was thinking probably Jonathan might be a good person to ask…" she said, looking to Will for input. Will smiled.

"I know he'll do it," Will assured her, and Max smiled…and then, of course, proceeded to talk endlessly about how much she can't wait to drive, what type of car she wanted to own, and basically an endless drone of excitable noise the entire time the two of them made their way to his house. Will tried to pay attention, he really did – but whenever she got really excited, her words tended to blend together to the point when they were largely unintelligible. He didn't hold it against her, though. Mike was the same.

When they got home, the two of them played some Atari for a while, with Max insisting on starting off with a racing game (what they had wasn't very good, though, so they eventually switched to something else). After a while, Max spoke up in the middle of their two-player

game of Space Invaders.

“Y’know…I’ve been thinking for a while now about something I want to do when I get my license,” she said, glancing over at him. Will kept his eyes on the screen, his focus entirely on the game.

“Yeah?” Will asked. “What is it?”

“I want to take you on a road trip,” Max said boldly, pausing the game and forcing Will to look over at her. “To California.”

Will, looking at her, blinked in surprise. “California?” he repeated. He knew that Max was from there, and she talked about how much she liked it there pretty often, but it had always seemed so impossibly far away that Will had a hard time wrapping his head around the very concept of the state. He knew that there were a lot of beaches out there from the movies, the president was from there…and that was about it. “Why?” he asked.

“Because I want to take you out there,” she said, shrugging. “It’s where I’m from. And San Francisco is, like, the best place for gay people in the entire world, period. We could finally be allowed to be ourselves. You know that they have entire bars and clubs dedicated to people like us there? It’s pretty rad.”

“I…didn’t know that,” Will admitted, leaning back on the couch. The thought of being able to not hide who he was, to be himself…that actually sounded really nice. “But isn’t California pretty far away? I mean, there’s a reason that you haven’t gone back since you moved here…”

“Well, duh, it will probably take a few days to get there by car. But it would be worth it!” Max insisted, a small grin on her face. “I seriously think you’d like it over there. The attitude of people there, it’s just a lot more chill and laid back. We can just…say that we’re going on a college trip or something!” Will raised an eyebrow incredulously. “I mean, maybe we will find a college out there and we can go to it after high school!”

Will laughed. “Uh, Max, I think we’re getting a little ahead of ourselves here…”

“Whatever. We’ll figure that out once we get there. But come on, it will be fun! What do you say?” she asked. It took Will a moment to realize that she was seriously asking him, right now, if she wanted to go on a road trip to *California*. And the more he thought about it…the more appealing it sounded. But it was still so unbelievably unrealistic that he couldn’t see it possibly working.

“Max, I just don’t know…” Will said, sighing. “I mean, of course I’d like to, but it will cost a lot of money and—”

“No, no, shut up right there,” she interrupted him, looking him square in the eye. “I’ll handle the nitty-gritty details like money and shit. But you said you really want to go?” she confirmed. Slowly, Will nodded. He did. Max grinned. “Okay. Good,” she said, holding up her pinky in front of Will, “then I promise, one day, to take you out there. No matter how long it takes, I swear that I will bring you to California.”

Will slowly smiled, bringing his pinky up and wrapping it around Max’s. He had no idea if they were actually ever going to go to California, but her putting it like that actually sounded pretty nice. And she seemed pretty insistent anyway, so why not? Of course, money was *not* just some nitty-gritty detail that could be overlooked…

“Good. No taking it back now!” Max said gleefully, unpausing the game as the two of them began playing again. Well, if they were going to take this road trip Max had in mind, then it would probably be pretty far off in the future…so, he figured that there was no point in worrying about it now. Right now, he should focus more on the video game in front of him, which Max was currently demolishing him in.

Eventually, after Max beating him in nearly every game, the front door to his house opened. Will was expecting his mother, or Jonathan, either of whom would likely begin making dinner as soon as they came in after a quick hello. But it was neither, and instead the person who came through the door took him completely by surprise: it was none other than Michael Wheeler.

Stunned, Will felt a blush creeping across his cheeks. He was usually

pretty good at controlling it, but the fact that Mike had just barged into his house with no warning made him suddenly very flustered. He could feel his heart rate nearly increase just be looking at him as Mike turned over towards the two of them and smiled. Max, who was a little less surprised than Will was, smiled back, glancing over at Will with a knowing look. Oh, she definitely knew that he was having a heart attack right about now, and she was reveling in it.

“Hey guys,” Mike said, a grin on his face as Will tried to stealthily pinch himself to snap out of it. He could see Max slightly smirking at him out of the corner of his eye. He needed at least fifteen minutes to mentally prepare himself for this boy, it wasn’t his fault that he had been ambushed like this!

“H-hey!” Will managed to say, although it was more like a yelp. Mike seemed to be startled by it, but Will tried to quickly move on from the outburst. “Uhh, what are you doing here?”

Mike looked like he was about to respond, but at that moment, Jonathan and Mike’s older sister, Nancy, walked into the home, closing the door behind them. The two of them had been dating for roughly a year and a half now, and Will still couldn’t not find it a little weird that his brother was dating the sister of his crush. The two of them rarely spent time in the house together, though, preferring instead to go out on dates at restaurants or somewhere else entirely…Jonathan had never really clarified, to be honest. So Nancy’s warm smile of greeting turned to one of confusion as she saw the redhaired girl sitting in the Byers’ home. Outside of a few close friends, very few people knew just how often Max spent over there with him.

“Hi Will…Max,” Nancy said, eyeing the two of them sitting on the couch together. Will and Max glanced at each other. There was something…weird about her.

“Hey Will,” Jonathan said, putting a few of his things down in their living room as he forced a smile on his face. Will immediately noticed something weird about him as well. “Uhh, I invited Mike and Nancy over for dinner tonight, I hope that’s okay,” he said, giving him a little bit of an explanation. Although it wasn’t really much of an explanation, seeing as how Jonathan had rarely ever invited Nancy

over for dinner with them, and Jonathan had never invited Mike along with her.

A pause ensued, and Will realized that his older brother was waiting for him to respond. Why wouldn't it be okay. "Uh, yeah, sure!" Will said. Jonathan smiled in response, clapping his hands together.

"Okay, great!" he said, smiling as he turned towards his girlfriend. "I'm going to go, ah…start on dinner," he said, turning on his heels and walking over to the kitchen. Will couldn't really place it, but something was really, really strange about him. Nancy let him know that she'd be with him in a minute.

"It's nice to see you both," Nancy said earnestly as she looked at Will and Max. "Umm, we weren't interrupting anything, were we?" she asked. It took Will a minute for him to realize what exactly she was implying. "I didn't realize that you two were…"

"WE'RE NOT!" Max and Will almost instantaneously blurted out. Nancy, and even Mike, who surely knew this by now, looked startled by the outburst.

"Oh, sorry, I didn't mean to assume…" Nancy trailed off, giving them both a forced smile. "It's good to see you both," she reiterated, before awkwardly turning around and going back to be with Jonathan in the kitchen. Max and Will were both beet red in embarrassment, and Nancy looked embarrassed too, but for some reason Will felt like there was still something else off about Mike's older sister. Why would Jonathan just invite the two of them out of the blue like that?

"What's up with them?" Max whispered as Mike sat down with them, vocalizing Will's thoughts exactly. At least he knew he wasn't going crazy.

Mike furrowed his brow. "I was hoping you'd know. I dunno…but something's definitely up," he said, looking at the both of them uncertainly. "Nancy picked me up after school and just said that we were going for dinner at your place, and then Jonathan picked us up…they've both been acting weird all day. I think they're hiding something."

Hiding something? What would they have to hide? Will had always thought that Jonathan shared everything with him. He even knew that Jonathan liked Nancy months before they began dating.

“What do you think it is?” Max asked, confused, when suddenly her eyes widened. “Do you think…Jonathan proposed?” she asked in a whisper, as if the idea had just come to her. Will highly doubted that, and from Mike’s expression it looked like he did as well.

“I don’t think so,” Mike said. “I mean, I feel like at least one of us would know something by now, right?”

“Plus, Jonathan isn’t really the marrying type,” Will said agreeably. Although, there was a time not too long ago when he thought that Jonathan wasn’t the type to have girlfriends either (for completely different reasons from himself), and he had been proven wrong.

“Well, regardless, I think we’re gonna find out tonight. I mean, why else would he have invited us here?” Mike asked, sitting down on the couch next to Will. “Anyway, what were you guys playing?”

“Space Invaders,” Max said, a grin coming over her face. “Ready for me to tear you a new asshole, Wheeler?” Will, not knowing if he had the energy to play another match, offered the controller to Mike, who took it gladly.

“You’re on, Mad Max.”

Mike offered her a more formidable competition than Will was able to accomplish, but Max was still able to beat him most matches. Will’s mind found himself distracted from the game, however, for two reasons: the first being whatever was going on between Jonathan and Nancy; the other being the fact that Mike’s leg was pressed up against his as Mike leaned over him to get a better vantage point for the game. Will was certain that the action was innocent on Mike’s part… but the thoughts running through Will’s head as Mike continued to brush his leg against him were anything but innocent.

It took Will a lot of mental concentration to try to sit next to him calmly and not spontaneously combust, but thankfully after a while his Mom came home, and soon after that Jonathan had finished

preparing dinner. Like them, his mother had also been surprised to see Nancy and Mike at the house, but as everyone sat down at the table, it seemed pretty clear that they had something they needed to discuss. And sure enough, as the two older teens glanced at each other nervously, it looked like they were going to get down to business straight away.

“So, you guys are probably wondering why we gathered you all here today,” Jonathan said in an unusually formal tone, making Nancy, who was sitting next to him, cringe. He turned to her with a hint of worry in his eyes. “What, too much?”

“You’re just making it seem like a bigger deal than it is…” Nancy said, pausing soon after. “Although, I guess it is kind of a big deal…”

“What are you guys talking about?” Max asked, her face scrunched up in confusion. Nancy and Jonathan glanced at each other again, before Jonathan continued.

“So, last week both of us got a lot of acceptance letters to different colleges…” Jonathan started to explain. “We haven’t told anyone else yet because we were still figuring out what we wanted to do after graduation. But we wanted to tell you guys first.”

College. That hit Will like a pound of bricks, even though he knew he shouldn’t be surprised. Jonathan was a senior in high school now, and he was going to graduate in only a few weeks, so of course he should have seen it coming. But still, he was definitely caught off guard. His older brother had been a steady and stable part of his life for so long, even when circumstances radically changed around them, that he couldn’t really imagine life without him at home, cooking dinner and watching over them like he always had.

“Oh, how exciting!” His mother said cheerfully as Will sat there, stunned. He could tell from her voice that she was a little caught off guard as well. “Wait…have you already decided where you are going?”

Nancy nodded. “Well, that’s what we’re going to discuss…” she said carefully, glancing at Jonathan before continuing. “I got into NYU. And Jonathan’s application was…rejected…but he was accepted into

a community college really close to there. We think that he'll probably be able to take some classes at NYU, and if he does well enough he might even be able to transfer there. So…that's where we're going. New York…together."

New York. Once again, Will was stunned. Yes, of course he knew that NYU was Jonathan's dream school…but it had always been not only a stretch, it had also seemed so far off into the future that Will couldn't even conceive of it, and now that it was actually happening Will had a hard time coming to grips with it. In his mind, that was practically as far as California. As he glanced over at Mike, who was sitting next to him, he saw a similarly shocked expression on his face.

Will just hoped that his surprise didn't translate to disappointment to his brother.

"Congratulations!" Joyce said finally, beaming from ear to ear as she got up from her seat, hugging both Nancy and Jonathan from the back. "I'm so proud of you both!" Jonathan chuckled as Nancy smiled thankfully.

"Thanks…" Jonathan said, glancing over at Will. He exhaled sharply. "I guess this comes the hard part…" he started to say as the Byers mother sat back down again. "We were planning on taking the summer to move there and get settled, so…we're going to be leaving for New York basically right after graduation."

Now this was something Will couldn't have predicted. "W-what?" he asked softly.

Nancy glanced at Jonathan, and then looked back at the rest of them. "We just thought…with everything…we need to get away from Hawkins," she said, not explaining herself any further. They all understood what she meant. So much had happened since Will had disappeared, and they were all scarred in their own little ways. This place did not exactly hold fond memories for any of them. "We want a, uh, fresh start, and to see wherever that takes us."

Before Joyce or anyone else could say anything right now, Jonathan jumped in again. "And Mom, I know money might be something you're wondering about when I go, but you won't have to worry

about that," he said, looking over at the eldest women at the table. "I've been talking with the lab…or, at least, Dr. Owens and what else is left of it, and they've actually got it covered. They're already pitching in for our tuitions, and I convinced them to take care of any expenses that you guys might have around the house. Will won't even have to get a job, if he doesn't want to!"

"How did you manage to do that?" Max asked skeptically, her brow furrowed. Jonathan looked over at her with a small, amused smile.

"Let's just say that they wouldn't like anyone else to know about their involvement with monsters or telekinetic girls, and they already know how loose-lipped we already are," he said. "Plus, we saved their and everyone else's respective asses from the apocalypse, and that isn't a debt we are willing to let them forget lightly."

"And you better believe that if there's a hint of some sort of Demogorgon or something returning to Hawkins, then we'll come back immediately," Nancy said. "But…Dr. Owens doesn't seem to think there's a very good chance of that, and with the Gate closed, we believe him. And more importantly…we need to get away. Not from any of you, just…the memories," she added with a shiver.

Silence. That was all that Will heard for a while as he, and everyone else, digested everything that they had said. Nancy and Jonathan weren't just going away to college; they were moving away entirely. The suddenness of the announcement had Will upset, at the very least…it was almost more upsetting that he could understand exactly why his older brother was making this decision, and yet still be upset about it.

"Have you told Mom and Dad yet?" Mike asked suddenly, looking at Nancy. "You think they'd be okay with this?"

The older Wheeler sighed. "I haven't told them, and I'm not too concerned about what they're going to think," she said, rolling her eyes. "I'm eighteen and an adult, and it's not like they can say no. Plus, I doubt Dad will even care that I'm gone. Mom might even like the fact that I'm being sent away with someone."

Jonathan glanced over at his mother nervously. "But Mom…I really

care about what you have to say. If you don't want me to go this far away, or you don't think it's a good idea to move so soon, then…I'll listen to you."

Joyce paused for a moment, reaching over the table to grab her eldest son's hand before shaking her head. "No…if this is what you want, then I trust you," she said, a small, bittersweet smile coming to her face. "I'm very proud of you. Both of you," she added, pointing at Nancy as well as they both gave her a smile of relief.

Smiling at his mother for a moment, Jonathan then turned over to Will with concern in his eyes. "Will…after everything that's happened between us, you deserve to get a veto on this, too," he said slowly.

"I…" Will still didn't really know how to feel about this. What he did know, though, was that however painful it might feel to see Jonathan so eager to leave, he would feel ten times worse if he stood in the way of Jonathan achieving his dreams. He also didn't trust his voice then, so he just shook his head. Jonathan let out a sigh of relief, and then suddenly got up from his chair.

"C'mere, buddy," Jonathan said as he approached him, walking around to his side of the table with his arms opened. Will hadn't realized that he had started crying until he got up from his chair and hugged his older brother, burying his face in his chest as he tried to wipe some of his tears on his shirt.

The rest of the dinner was emotional for all of them. Jonathan and Nancy talked more about their plans for the future, and the more they talked about it, the more Will saw that this was truly what his brother wanted. He was getting really excited just now, talking about how he was going to send them as many pictures as possible of Times Square and the Empire State Building. The more they talked about it, the more Will realized that the Big Apple just screamed *Jonathan*. He would be happy there. There was still a lot of crying and hugging from his end, as well as his mother's, and even Mike and Nancy (out of all people!) shared a hug. The only person who largely stayed silent during the entire meal, outside of giving the couple a congratulation, was Max.

Eventually, Jonathan drove Nancy and Mike back, and Max and Will went into his room in order to work on homework for tomorrow; or, perhaps more accurately, the two of them pretended to be doing homework late at night while they just talked and hung out instead, like they usually did. It was a part of their regular routine, although obviously with this most recent bombshell, it significantly shifted the regular focus of their conversation (which was usually teasing about their respective crushes anyway).

Max let out a deep breath as she closed the door to the room. Will sat down on his bed, releasing a similar breath that he had been keeping in as he plopped down. "How are you taking, um…all of *that*?" Max asked uncertainly, sitting down on the chair on the other side of the small room.

"I…I don't know," he admitted. He really, really didn't know. "I mean…I guess I'm happy for him? It'll just be weird to not have him around…I'll miss him." He glanced over at her as she slumped over in the chair. "What about you?"

Max shrugged. "I guess I don't know either," she said, sighing. "It's not like I'm family with him or anything, I'm obviously not as close with him as you are…but I still feel like I'm going to miss him, even though I know that's pretty weird." Will straightened up, looking at her carefully. She had a sad, wistful look in her eyes, but what she had said made him very confused.

"Max…it's not weird that you're going to miss him at all," he said, furrowing his brow as Max looked up at him away from wherever she had drifted off to. "You really don't see yourself as part of this family yet? You practically live here. You have as much of a right to miss him as much as I do."

The redhaired girl looked surprised for a moment, her eyes widening, but as she pursed her lips she gradually formed a soft smile. "Family…" she said, repeating the word quietly. "I…you really see me that way?"

"Do you not?" Will asked again.

"Of course I do…I guess I just never said it out-loud," Max said, the

smile widening on her lips. “But, uh, yeah, I guess you’re right. We’re family.”

Will raised an eyebrow. “You guess?”

Max rolled her eyes. “Okay, I don’t guess. You’re right. Happy, *little brother*?” she asked, a smirk on her face as Will grinned at her happily. Despite her sarcastic tone, that was actually very meaningful coming from her. “And I will miss Jonathan…” she asked, her smile largely disappearing as she gained a thoughtful expression once again.

Will sighed. “Well…the good news is that if he’s really moving out, you can take his room, right?” he said optimistically, trying to take his mind off of the sad aspects of his older brother’s departure. Max let the hints of amusement cross her face, although it was pretty clear that something else was on her mind.

“Yeah, I guess so…” she said slowly, looking back at him. “But… Jonathan was going to be my go-to to drive with me. And now it looks like Nancy is out of the running, too.” Oh, right. Her learner’s permit. She still needed someone to drive with.

“Well…maybe my Mom could drive some with you? Or Chief Hopper?” Will suggested, although he didn’t know how much free time they would have given that they both worked full-time. Max shook her head, obviously thinking the same thing. Of course, she had a long time to meet the hour requirements, but Will could tell that she was eager to get them done as soon as possible.

“I don’t want to inconvenience either of them…” she said, sighing. “I think it should still be alright. I still have two more people in mind…I just really hope that I don’t have to go with the second option.”

“Well, who is option one?”

The slick, loud, and obnoxious Camaro pulled up to the rich, lavish

home. Max's step-brother Billy, who was just as obnoxious as the stupid car that he drove, was seated in the driver's seat, while Max herself was in the passenger's seat. She really hated that Billy had to driver her here; under any other circumstances, she would have just ridden her bike here, although this house was pretty far away from her own. Or she might have asked if Jonathan, who was still in town for another month, could have driven her.

But tonight was one of the rare nights that she needed to stay with her "family," otherwise known as the ugly and loveless conglomerate of people which included her asshole of a step-brother, her abusive step-father, and her birth mother who resembled more of a ghost than an actual person anymore. Seeing as how she couldn't leave (yet), she was required to spend at least some nights at "home" with this "family," even if she never did so willingly. And so, when Max wanted to leave that prison temporarily, Billy drove her in order to make sure that she wasn't just going to be running off.

Billy put the car into park as he leaned back in his seat. "Fifteen minutes," he said in a low, gravely voice as Max shot him a distasteful look. He had his sunglasses on as he looked away at the road in front of him, not even glancing at her. It took all of Max's energy not to spring out the car door window and run one hundred miles away; she didn't want Billy to chase after her, after all. And also, she was here for a reason. She quickly got out of the car, slamming the passenger-side door behind her.

Walking up to the large house that wasn't too familiar to her, Max glanced back at Billy. She knew that he didn't like the person that she was going to see, nor did the person she was going to see particularly like Billy. But as long as he stayed in the car, which he said he would, then it probably would be okay. She would just have to make sure to keep this visit short. She knocked loudly on the door, and a few seconds later Steve Harrington opened up, his hair a chaotic yet admirable mess. As he recognized her, he smiled widely at her.

"Mad Max," he said fondly, grinning. Max couldn't help but grin as well.

"Stevie boy Wonder," she shot back as a reply, causing Steve to raise an eyebrow. Okay, maybe that wasn't the greatest nickname she had

ever come up with. Steve still let her in anyway, so maybe that was a good sign?

Early on after the events of the Fall of 1984, Steve Harrington had gotten closer to most of the kids, but for some reason after graduating from high school he had grown relatively distant from most of them. Outside of Dustin, of course. Steve was like the older brother that Dustin Henderson never had. But every time she had seen him since, he always seemed like he was preoccupied with something else; with what, though, was anyone's guess. Max wasn't as close with him as some of the other boys (especially Dustin) so she never pried.

"So, Max, what brings you to my humble abode?" Steve said, a smirk on his face as he walked her into the house. Steve's parents were wealthy, and he practically lived in a mansion…but as far as she knew, Steve only worked as a cashier at a gas station in town. For someone with as many connections as he had with his parents, Max would have assumed that he would be doing something a bit bigger…although perhaps that something bigger could just be driving her.

"Well, I was wondering if you could help me with this," she said, reaching into her pocket and flashing the laminated learner's permit in front of her for him to see. Steve's eyes widened as he looked at the provisional license, and immediately looked at her uncomfortably.

"Max, I can't…" Steve started to say awkwardly, then sighed. "Look, I don't know who told you that I used to make fake IDs, but I don't anymore, and I can't really start that up again…I could probably hook you up with the name of a couple guys but with one of your best friend's fathers being the police chief and shit, I really don't think—"

"Steve, I don't want a fake ID!" Max interrupted, taking Steve by surprise. "Wait, you actually made those?"

Steve laughed nervously. "What?? No, I…nooooo…" he said in what was probably the least-convincing denial Max had ever seen. Steve cleared his throat before she could question him further, though. "So, uh, what did you want with that?"

Max rolled her eyes. “All I wanted was to get some hours behind the wheel,” she said. “I need forty. I was wondering if maybe this summer we could go out and do some? Assuming you can take some time off from your job.”

Steve Harrington looked startled once again, but this time there was something different about his demeanor. He seemed…evasive. It almost reminded Max of how Jonathan and Nancy were acting a few days ago. “Uhh, I quit my job last week…” he admitted, sighing. “Look, kid, I guess there’s no good way to say this, but I can’t teach you how to drive because…I’m only in town for a few more days.”

Wait, what? So soon after Jonathan and Nancy, too? “When did this happen?” Max asked, still a little stunned by this impromptu announcement. “Hell, forget that, *where* are you moving to?”

“New York,” he responded. Max’s eyes widened. Even though he was leaving earlier than the other two teens, assuming that he really was only days away from leaving, the fact that he was going to New York at all…that couldn’t be a coincidence. “I’m sorry, I know you’re probably gonna yell at me for not telling you sooner, but I really only just figured it out and—”

“Why are you going to New York with Jonathan and Nancy?” Max asked, interrupting Steve again for the second time that conversation. It seemed that she kept on taking Steve off guard, because now he was looking at her like she had just unfurled her skin and had revealed her true identity as a demodog. There were traces of surprise in his expression, but also…worry. Maybe even fear.

“Wha—uhh, how did you find that out???” Steve sputtered, his voice rising a couple of unnatural pitches. Max looked taken aback.

“I didn’t. But Jonathan and Nancy said they were going to New York, and there’s no way that you are just coincidentally moving up to New York without them,” she said, looking at him uncertainly. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” Steve snapped at her way too quickly. “Max, you can’t tell anyone else that I’m going to New York with them. You *can’t*. Only Dustin knows, and even then…you really, *really* need to keep this to

yourself."

"Wait, were you just not going to tell us?" Max asked indignantly. "Steve, we're your *friends*. Why does it even matter if you're moving out with them?"

Steve glanced away from her, looking down at the floor of his house. Max knew that he was definitely hiding something, but in that moment, she recognized his fearful, evasive demeanor. She had seen it with Will…and more importantly, she recognized it because she had seen it within herself as well. Steve, like them, had a big, big secret that he wasn't sharing.

Steve sighed. "I was going to tell you guys eventually…but I guess I might as well go ahead and say it…" he rubbed his face with his hands, and after his hands were removed Max saw a large, red blush on his cheeks. "So, I guess it's pretty hard to describe, but I'm kind of in a…relationship…with Nancy…and Jonathan."

Steve was just full of surprises today. "What?" Max asked. "What do you mean, a relationship?"

"I mean, a relationship!" he insisted. "As in, I'm dating both of them…and they're dating me." Max was stunned. Steve Harrington, former high school jock, cool kid at school…was he really— "I know what you're thinking, and the answer is no. I'm not…gay. But I'm also not completely straight either. I…I don't know, like I said, it's hard to describe."

"You like both Nancy and Jonathan? You…you can do that?" Max asked carefully, the thought never really crossing her mind. The mere thought that someone could go from dating the opposite sex to being attracted to the same sex lit a small but existent spark inside her mind that maybe that could be the case for Jane as well. Although it would take a disaster of truly epic proportions to tear her away from Mike's side…unless Mike was the same way. That would certainly be good for Will…wait, why the hell was she thinking about this? Keep your focus on Steve, idiot!

Steve shrugged. "I…yeah, I think so," he said, sighing. "I mean, at first I thought I was going crazy, but…Jonathan feels the same way

that I do. I'm still not entirely convinced that I'm not going crazy anyway, but unless he's going crazy too, then…yeah. You can like both." Steve rubbed the back of his neck nervously, still avoiding Max's gaze. "That's a big reason why we're moving to New York… outside of Nancy getting into NYU and everything. We want to try to make *something* work between all of us, and there's no chance of that happening here in Hawkins. So I've been saving up from my job at the gas station and I'll find a cheap apartment for all of us, I'll find a full-time job, Jon will study and work part-time while Nancy studies full-time at school."

Suddenly, the abruptness of Nancy and Jonathan's announcement made a lot more sense…as well as some of their odder behaviors during dinner. "Okay…" Max said slowly, nodding. As he glanced over at her, Steve still seemed to be anxious about all of this, although she wasn't really sure why…oh wait, yes she was. In her mind, it was obvious that she would accept Steve's sexuality, but Steve probably wasn't so certain. "Hey, come on, did you really think I would care?" she asked, smiling at the tall, groomed young man. He slumped his shoulders, seemingly relieved. Max opened her arms, walking towards him. "C'mere."

Smiling wryly, Steve stood up to hug Max back as she wrapped her arms around his torso. He wasn't anywhere near an emotional wreck like Will was when he told her, but she could tell that he appreciated her acceptance. "You…you promise you won't tell anyone, right? Jon and Nancy don't want anyone to know yet, and I've only told Dustin…just keep it to yourself, alright?" he asked. Max wanted to tell Will; after all, Jonathan was his brother, and she knew that if she told Steve that Will was gay and would accept the relationship then he would probably be okay with it. But that would then require Max to betray Will's trust, and if she didn't ask Steve if it was okay to tell Will and just told him anyway then she would be betraying Steve's trust…so she decided that the best thing to do would be to respect Steve's wishes.

"Yeah, of course," she said, pulling away from him. "Your secret's safe with—"

Max was interrupted by the obnoxious sound of a car horn from the road. Crap, she had almost forgotten: her fifteen minutes were up.

“Shit,” she swore, looking over at Steve regretfully. “Sorry, my asshole step-brother’s waiting for me…” she said hopelessly. Steve nodded, seeming to understand. “I…thanks for telling me. I’ll miss you.” As she tried to walk away, Steve stopped her by putting a gentle hand on her shoulder and hugging her one last time.

“Thanks for listening,” he said, grinning at her as he pulled away, walking her over to the door. “Until our paths cross again.” Max shot him a grin back, and it was only until she was out of his house when she felt the small pang of regret that she didn’t tell him her secret then. Max sighed. It would have to wait until next time, at least.

Regardless, as she walked over to Billy’s car, she realized that her first option to help her drive would be out for the count. Her second and, as far as she was concerned now, only option was now sitting in the driver’s seat of the car in front of her. As much as she didn’t want to (and she really, really didn’t want to), she realized she didn’t have much of a choice in the matter. There was no way any adults would be able to find the time to drive her, and she didn’t want to be a burden to any of them, either. But not only was her step-brother not doing anything for the entire summer as far as she knew, she didn’t mind being a burden to Billy.

Max decided to get straight down to business as she opened the passenger door and climbed in. “What will it take for you to drive with me?” she asked, sighing.

Billy was about to shift the gear into drive, but he stopped, lowering his sunglasses as he looked over at her. “Isn’t that what we’re doing now?” he asked gruffly.

Max fought back the urge to groan in frustration. “No. I need hours behind the wheel so I can get my license, but I can’t do that without someone watching me.” She looked over at him again. “What will it take for you to do that with me?” she asked, repeating the question again to him. He probably needed it repeated, on account of the fact that he was very stupid. Billy was silent as he looked over at her, making Max uncomfortable. “I don’t really have money, unless you want some quarters from the arcade which I’ll *gladly* give you.”

“I don’t want money,” he said, pulling his sunglasses up again. “All I

want is for you to stop spending the night at your friends' and start staying at home."

Max's stomach plummeted. There was nothing very inviting or enticing about her "home." And it wasn't like Billy really liked her there anyway, but Max knew exactly why he had made this request: Neil. Her step-father wanted to portray himself as the perfect, model family man, but as long as Max stayed away as often as she did, that image would always be damaged. And when Neil noticed cracks in that image, he would take out his rage on Billy. But Max really, really didn't want to stay home.

"Okay, let's make a deal. I'll stay home four out of seven days a week," she said, worrying that she had already given up too much. After all, at this point she was staying over at the Byers' (and sometimes Jane's) six days of the week. She even had some changes of clothes in Will's room. Billy looked over at her again.

"Six," he said, his hands gripping the steering wheel tightly.

"Five. And if you ask for any more, I'll just get my hours whenever I get them and there will be no deal," Max shot back, hoping her gamble would pay off. The fact of the matter was, she wanted to get her hours done as soon as possible; even if she wasn't allowed to drive for another year and a half, she felt that checking all of the boxes beforehand would get her even closer to that sweet, sweet independence which she craved. Mentally, she needed to get in all of her driving hours by the end of the summer, no matter how long it took.

Thankfully, Billy nodded stiffly, his hand reaching down to the gearshift and switching the gear to drive. Looking out the window, Max breathed out a sigh of relief as the car sped away towards the Mayfield-Hargrove household. That sense of relief, however, was severely undercut by the sad fact that she would be driving with Billy Hargrove for the entire summer.

Notes for the Chapter:

> Okay okay, it's finally here: Chapter 6! I'm really sorry that I haven't updated this story in a while, the

fact of the matter is I've both been really busy and hit a bit of a writer's block midway through this chapter for a while. But as promised, this chapter is much lighter than the last couple so in some ways it was easier for me to write. The next couple chapters will be heavily from Max's perspective, and while the next chapter will be pretty light the chapter afterwards will get into some heavy shit again. I'll provide trigger warnings and more tags as necessary.

Anyway, I hope you liked this chapter! Please let me know what you think in the comments, I love hearing what you have to say :)